ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
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Seven Seas Entertainment

THE HUSKY & HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN:
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN VOL. 5

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Chapter 155:
Shizun, Aren't You Surprised?

AS THE WEDDING of Rufeng Sect's young master drew near, a rumor began to circulate. In no time it had reached the ears of guests from all major sects, causing quite the stir.

"Zhang-gongzi, listen, I heard something outrageous a few days ago. But the more I think about it, the more I'm sure it's got to be true. Wanna hear?"

"What a coincidence! I also heard a shocking secret about Rufeng Sect. Could it be the same?"

His companion waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Does Zhang-gongzi's secret involve two particular people?" he asked, voice heavy with implication.

"Indeed it does."

After exchanging a meaningful glance, one of them said quietly, "I'll go first: I heard Rufeng Sect's Ye Wangxi and…"

At this, his companion couldn't keep a straight face, much less maintain the dignified bearing of a young master. He guffawed and slapped his thigh, eyes sparkling with the thrill of sharing secrets. "Yes, yes! Ha ha ha, I nearly laughed my head off—that's it! Rufeng Sect's Ye Wangxi and Song Qiutong are having an affair!"

"As they say, bad news travels a thousand miles before good news makes it out the door. I wouldn't have guessed that even someone like yourself who avoids petty gossip would've heard about this. We should keep it down, though. We *are* in Linyi, and there are Rufeng Sect members everywhere—the walls have ears, you know."

Whether the walls had ears or not was hard to say. But a rumor repeated oft enough soon became indistinguishable from fact. Though nobody could claim they'd actually seen any evidence of this affair, the rumor swelled like a wad of cotton in water, the details growing lusher and more lurid with each telling. As it spread, even commoners in the small villages outside Linyi heard it whispered in their paddies and fields.

"Goudan-ge,[1] I'll tell you a secret, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else."

“What secret? Don’t be coy—tell me! My lips are sealed; I won’t speak a word.”

“Then you’d better listen good. There’s a shocking scandal going on at Rufeng Sect. That Song Qiutong—you know her, right? The girl who’s about to marry Nangong Si? Turns out she’s quite the little vixen, heh. Maybe Goudan-ge hasn’t heard—she’s already turned her back on her fiancé and hooked up with Ye Wangxi!”

“What? Why?!”

“Why not? Don’t you know when Song Qiutong was auctioned off at Xuanyuan Pavilion back in the day, Ye Wangxi was the one who fancied her first and bought her for dual cultivation? I bet he had all sorts of nasty ideas!”

Flabbergasted, Li Goudan’s mouth fell open. Only after a long while did he manage to stammer out, “H-heavens above… How could such a thing happen…”

The humble villager’s mind was turned upside down. That night, Li Goudan hugged his wife close as they chatted with their heads on pillows. “Chunhua, you’re the best,” he said with feeling.

His wife, Zhao Chunhua, blinked. “What’s wrong—why are you saying this all of a sudden?”

“Look here, you might be a little bit fat, short, and ugly, but at least you work hard and bear children. Not like some little ladies who cheat on their husbands and don’t know a woman’s place.”

Zhao Chunhua was peeved. “How am I ugly? My complexion’s a little sallow is all!” Nevertheless, her curiosity had been piqued. “Whose wife is sleeping around? Why haven’t I heard about it?”

“They’re not from our village—it’s a Daoist lady and master from that lot always flying about on swords.”

“Who?” Zhao Chunhua asked in astonishment.

“Those two who are about to have a big wedding,” replied Li Goudan.

It took Zhao Chunhua a moment to think of Nangong Si. She stared blankly for a while before understanding hit. “Heavens, no!” she exclaimed and sat bolt upright in bed. “Seriously? You better not be pulling my leg.”

“Why would I?” Li Goudan puffed out his chest. He wanted his wife to trust him, so he said solemnly, “One of my buddies saw Rufeng Sect’s Ye Wangxi and Song Qiutong getting it on with his own two eyes! They’ve been sneaking around behind Nangong Si’s back since ages ago!”

In all this vast world, talk of love affairs traveled fastest. Everyone—the rich and the poor, cultivators and ordinary folk alike—happily seized upon this new topic of conversation. In the blink of an eye, the guests gathered within Rufeng Sect had all heard of the scandal. By the time the tale made its way to Chu Wanning’s ears, it had sprouted a truly splendid pair of wings. The year, month, and day of all Ye Wangxi and Song Qiutong’s secret rendezvous had been precisely determined. It was even going about that Song Qiutong was hurrying to marry Nangong Si because she’d fallen pregnant, but Ye Wangxi was a heartless reprobate who refused to damage his future prospects by acknowledging her and the babe.

“If you don’t believe it, wait and see for yourself who that kid takes after—Nangong Si or Ye Wangxi!”

Chu Wanning knew Nangong Si but not Ye Wangxi or Song Qiutong. He couldn’t say whether the rumor was true or false, yet felt extremely irritated by it. Unfortunately, he was the type who was much more effective against clearly defined threats. When it came to these more nebulous matters, and in particular anything of a romantic nature, his hands might as well have been tied behind his back. He had no clue what to do.

Thus, when Nangong Si paid a visit to Chu Wanning in the guest courtyard, Chu Wanning subtly tried to probe him. But Nangong Si failed to catch any of his implications. As before, he only blithely regaled Chu-zongshi with anecdotes about his faewolf, Naobaijin.

“I found a mate for him a while ago—it went pretty smooth. The bitch should birth a litter next month. I wonder how many pups we’ll get,” Nangong Si mused with a grin. “If any of the whelps are particularly good, I’ll have Father send one to Sisheng Peak.”

Chu Wanning saw an excellent opportunity, so he replied, “Mn, but I wonder if the blood of this wolf pup will be pure.”

“Why wouldn’t it be? Naobaijin and the bitch are both from the same breed of cultivational snow wolves. Can’t get any purer than that.”

“Are you sure the mother hasn’t been mated to another faewolf before?”

Nangong Si blinked. “No way. That she-wolf was raised by Bitan Manor, and she was the only faewolf in the whole place. She couldn’t find another mate even if she tried. There’s only been our Naobaijin.”

Chu Wanning thought he couldn’t be more obvious with the hints he was dropping. He was plainly drawing a parallel between people and wolves, and thus implying that Nangong Si should take care regarding those rumors. Why didn’t he get it? After some thought, Chu Wanning concluded that he must not have made himself clear. He deliberated further and added, “Even if she was the only faewolf at Bitan Manor, she must have stayed at Rufeng Sect for a while when you brought her here to mate with Naobaijin, right? You keep so many faewolves, could it be possible that…”

“No way!” Nangong Si laughed brightly. “So this is why Zongshi was worried? The she-wolf and Naobaijin shared the same kennel—how could the other wolves even have a chance?”

Chu Wanning was at a loss for words. *Forget it—hopeless idiot!*

Nangong Si didn’t notice Chu Wanning’s dark mood. He stood and extended an invitation. “Zongshi, the Moonwhistle Fields were unfinished when you left. Since then, they’ve been expanded twice. Why don’t I give you a short tour, and you can take Naobaijin for a ride?”

“I’ll have to decline,” said Chu Wanning.

“Why?” Nangong Si asked, visibly crestfallen.

“I don’t know how to ride anything but horses,” said Chu Wanning. “Anyway, stop playing around so much; you’re about to become someone’s husband. You can’t spend all your time raising wolf pups and cavorting about the training grounds. You ought to spend time with Miss Song whenever you can. People and animals are alike this way—if you don’t spend time together, you’ll drift apart.”

“Nah—Qiutong’s always good to me, and she’s very obedient too.”

Chu Wanning leveled him with a long stare.

“If Zongshi thinks I’m neglecting her, I’ll ask her to join us,” Nangong Si continued. “I talk about you all the time. I’m sure she’d be delighted to meet you.”

Since Chu Wanning wasn’t familiar with Song Qiutong, he couldn’t guess what of the rumors was true and what false. It occurred to him that it might not be a bad idea to get to know this young couple before the

wedding. Chu Wanning nodded and stood up. “Very well, why don’t you go fetch her then? I’ll wait for you at Moonwhistle Fields.”

On his way out, Nangong Si ran into Mo Ran on his way in. They exchanged bows beside the partition wall of the courtyard. Mo Ran spotted Chu Wanning as soon as he entered, standing beneath the branching osmanthus tree. Before him was a small red clay stove with threads of steam rising from it, and on the stone table sat two cups of half-drunk eight treasures tea.

“Shizun, did Nangong Si come for a visit?”

“Mn. He invited me to Moonwhistle Fields to see his faewolves.” Chu Wanning turned to head into his room. “These clothes aren’t suited for riding, so I’ll get changed.”

Faewolves were formidable creatures. Even if Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning could handle them, he didn’t feel comfortable letting him go alone. “I’ll accompany Shizun,” he offered.

Chu Wanning stopped in his tracks and shot him a sidelong glance. “Do you know how to ride wolves?”

Mo Ran grinned, his black eyes dancing. “Why not? I’m good on horseback; by extension, I should be good at riding anything. Wolves included.”

Chu Wanning was about to sneer when he realized there was something suggestively, dangerously ambiguous about the phrase, *I should be good at riding anything*. Those scenes he’d dreamt suddenly flashed before his eyes. He remembered the position of those two figures in his dreams—the sheen of sweat on Mo Ran’s sturdy torso, Chu Wanning himself helplessly sprawled on the bed, letting Mo Ran have his way, like a plaything trapped beneath Mo Ran’s body that the latter rode at a headlong gallop.

Chu Wanning’s face burned red. “Absolutely shameless!” he huffed under his breath. Whether he was reprimanding Mo Ran or himself was unclear. Chu Wanning turned on his heel, threw open the door to his room, and stalked inside. The rolled-up curtain over the door swayed in his wake, mimicking the juddering heart of the man taking refuge within.

Moonwhistle Fields was a vast clearing. Its dry vegetation rustled in the biting air, the yellow-green plain glazed with a layer of frost. The winter sun hung indifferent in the sky, chilly behind a screen of clouds, its

light half-hearted and lifeless.

In contrast, Rufeng Sect's private hunting grounds lay at one end of the clearing, lush with pines and cypresses. Their thick needles glowed gold at a distance, like the soft down of a baby bird. Nangong Si stood before the field's wooden fence in conversation with Song Qiutong. He caught sight of two silhouettes approaching through the mist—Chu Wanning and Mo Ran. After a start of surprise, he grinned. "Mo-zongshi, did you come with your shizun because you were worried about leaving him in my care?"

Mo Ran smiled back. "No. I came in case Shizun comes across anything that displeases him. If there's no one to take the brunt of his anger, he might vent it on Nangong-gongzi, and that would be unspeakably rude. I'm here as his punching bag."

Chu Wanning glared at him. "Seems to me like you're here to start trouble."

"Pfft." Song Qiutong, standing behind Nangong Si, let out a tinkling laugh. She lifted her lashes, fine as a chick's feathers, and gracefully stepped out from behind her fiancé. Everything about her was achingly beautiful: hair luxuriant as clouds, face charming as a flower in bloom.

She glanced at Mo Ran and Chu Wanning and said sweetly, "I've always heard that Chu-zongshi and Mo-zongshi share a deep master-disciple bond. Now I see it really is just as they say."

Chapter 156:
Shizun Is Good at Riding

CHU WANNING LOOKED Song Qiutong up and down. At Xuanyuan Pavilion, he had thought she possessed a beauty that could topple nations. Up close, he thought she was lovely as a lotus blooming over water or a rosy sky reflecting the dawn, the world around her set to sparkling by the light glinting from her ebon hair. Her beauty was without compare. No wonder Nangong Si was taken with her.

Chu Wanning stole a glance at Mo Ran to catch his reaction. He didn't expect, the moment he looked over, to find Mo Ran gazing back at him. Mo Ran hadn't been looking at Song Qiutong at all; Nangong Si might as well have been standing next to empty air. Instead, Mo Ran had been staring at Chu Wanning all this time.

Eyes met eyes, and Mo Ran smiled warmly. Chu Wanning felt himself go weak under Mo Ran's gaze but insisted on maintaining his unaffected expression. He and Mo Ran looked at each other for a fleeting instant before Chu Wanning turned his face aside with as much dignity as possible.

"We keep lots of faewolves at Moonwhistle Fields. Naobaijin is the most fearless of them—and also my favorite." Nangong Si led the group to the middle of the empty field and blew three shrill whistles on the jade flute he kept at his waist. There was a moment of silence. Then a fierce wind whipped out from the dense forest, white light and inky shadow whirling like a tornado. In the blink of an eye, a faewolf with a shimmering coat and golden claws leapt out of empty air, body curving into a sinuous arc. Silhouetted against that pale winter sun, the beast howled before alighting upon the ground. It drew to a halt just before Nangong Si and let out a short bark.

Nangong Si stepped forward to stroke the soft, fluffy ruff on Naobaijin's neck, then turned and grinned at Chu Wanning. "Zongshi, look—he's gotten so big. He was a tiny pup when you left."

"When I left, he was already the height of a full-grown man," Chu Wanning said expressionlessly.

"Ha ha ha ha, really? I always thought he was really small, like a puppy."

Chu Wanning eyed him doubtfully.

“Zongshi, why don’t you take him for a ride?” Nangong Si blew into the flute again, summoning two more snow-white faewolves from the forest. “Mo-zongshi, wanna try too?”

The three of them climbed onto the backs of their faewolves. “Hold on tight to the reins or their scruffs, and make sure to keep your legs tucked in,” Nangong Si advised. “It’s much like riding a horse.” He bent down to offer a hand to Song Qiutong. “Qiutong, you come up with me.”

Chu Wanning had thought he wouldn’t know how to ride the faewolf, but after a few moments on the wolf’s back, he found that it wasn’t terribly difficult. Faewolves were highly intelligent and sensitive to their riders’ intentions; they were in truth easier to ride than the average horse.

“How do you find it?” Nangong Si asked with a smile. “Shall we take a lap?”

“Are we allowed to go anywhere?”

“Of course—you can run your wolves anywhere in the forest behind the mountain or Moonwhistle Fields.”

Mo Ran grinned. “Are you proposing a race?”

Chu Wanning looked over at Nangong Si sitting astride his faewolf with Song Qiutong behind him. Perhaps, he thought, this was a perfect opportunity for the young couple to bond. He gladly agreed. “Let’s do it.”

Nangong Si cheerfully unclasped a bracelet of spiritual stones from his wrist. “How about this: we make for Ganquan Lake on the north edge of the forest and catch five groupers from the lake. The first to return to this spot with their catch is the winner, and this bracelet will be the prize. What do you say?”

“A bracelet of septimal-star[2] spiritual stones? Nangong-gongzi is too generous by far.”

“A thousand gold couldn’t buy me good cheer.” Nangong Si took up the reins and tilted his head to instruct Song Qiutong. “Make sure you hold on tight to keep from falling. Just let me know if we’re going too fast.”

Mo Ran shot a glance at Song Qiutong and said with a small smile, “Perhaps Nangong-gongzi should just give his bracelet away now and save the effort.”

“Ha! Don’t underestimate me. I grew up on wolfback. A passenger is nothing—even a second one wouldn’t make a difference. Let’s go, on the count of three: one, two—*three!”*

Three snow-white streaks darted toward the forest like arrows, clearing Moonwhistle Fields in a trice. They leapt into the hunting grounds and vanished into the depths of the woods.

At first, Chu Wanning kept pace behind Nangong Si and Song Qiutong. But his ears began to ache under the onslaught of Song Qiutong’s high-pitched screams. Unable to withstand the girl’s affected terror a moment longer, he spurred his wolf on and shot past. As the cries of “Gongzi, slow down!” faded behind him, Chu Wanning gradually began to see the appeal of riding a faewolf. These spiritual creatures were incredibly sharp—at the slightest twitch of his fingertips, Naobaijin grasped his intent and responded. It was little wonder Nangong Si loved these animals so dearly.

The wintry wind stung his face, but Chu Wanning didn’t feel the cold. He looked into the sunbeams scattering through the trees ahead as the ground rushed past beneath his feet like the receding tide. A smile stole across his face; this high-speed dash really was exhilarating. He urged Naobaijin on faster, the wolf’s claws kicking up dust as they struck the thick carpet of pine needles.

Behind him, Mo Ran was perched atop a black-clawed wolf; he had tailed Chu Wanning closely the whole ride. An indescribable comfort and contentment welled in Chu Wanning’s breast. He was struck by the hazy feeling that, finally, there was someone who would always follow close, footsteps echoing unceasingly—someone who would follow him no matter how far he ran, and no matter what floods he willfully forded into.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran reached Ganquan Lake at nearly the same time. The jade-green lake was clear as a mirror, its waters rippling with spiritual energy that nourished the shores and sheltered the flowering and fruiting trees from the turn of the seasons. Even now, in the dead of winter, the tangerine trees here flourished—their emerald leaves hid countless golden fruits, the sweet scent of citrus diffusing on the wind.

Chu Wanning deftly dismounted and looked around. “What a wonderful place.”

Leading the black-clawed faewolf, Mo Ran came nearer and smiled. “If Shizun likes it, we can plant lots of fruit trees when we get back to Sisheng Peak. We’ll support them with spiritual energy year-round so you can eat fruit whenever you want.”

Chu Wanning gave a noncommittal snort. He strode to the shore of the lake and summoned Tianwen.

Mo Ran, finding this strange, stopped him at once. “What are you doing?”

“Catching fish.”

Mo Ran eyed him dubiously. “Surely Shizun isn’t gonna cast Wind and snatch all the fish out of the lake?”

“Where do you get these ideas?” Chu Wanning glared at him. He tossed the golden vine upon the surface of the lake and said mildly, “Which of you tire of living? If you are willing, come to the hook.” After repeating this refrain thrice, Chu Wanning recalled Tianwen. The shining golden leaves indeed bore a few bighead carp with nothing left to live for. Bubbles leaked from their mouths as their white, puffy eyes rolled up to stare at the sky.

Chu Wanning looked over his catch, then turned to Mo Ran, “Did he say he wanted groupers?”

“Mn.”

Chu Wanning hesitated. “Do you know what groupers look like?” He considered that this question might still be too roundabout, so he brought Tianwen over to Mo Ran and held up the fish he’d caught. “Have I got any here?”

“…How about I catch some for Shizun?”

Mo Ran swiftly caught ten fish and split them between the qiankun

pouches around the two faewolves' necks. Chu Wanning lowered the despondent fish he'd caught back into the water. "Life is but a short period of suffering," he said softly as he let them go. "I must trouble your eminences to endure a while longer."

Mo Ran, listening, found this man both incredibly silly and cute. After he had safely stowed the last grouper, he turned and caught sight of Chu Wanning walking up the bank from the edge of the frigid, jade-green pool. The lake waters rippled behind him, blurring the edges of his white silhouette.

A violent impulse suddenly surged within Mo Ran's heart. He wanted to stride over and gather Chu Wanning into his arms. He wanted to hold him close, to caress him with utmost gentleness. Yet he also wanted to crush him to pieces, to drag him into the tangerine grove, press him against a tree, lift his legs, and ferociously invade his body. As he watched Chu Wanning approach, he was startled by how contradictory, how intense, this longing was. Both his softest and most vicious desires were destined to be aroused by Chu Wanning.

Love, oh love—wasn't it just like this? Unyielding and hot was the fierce blade that pierced one's burning chest; gentle and warm the tenderness that embraced one like spring water.

Chu Wanning missed the turbulence in Mo Ran's eyes as he drew closer to examine the qiankun pouch around Naobaijin's neck. "Nangong Si is really something," he said. "Riding so slowly just because he's got a girl with him."

Mo Ran felt rather feverish. As Chu Wanning lowered his head, Mo Ran stared wolfishly at the fair skin of his exposed neck. Heat stirred in his belly, and he muttered thoughtlessly, "Maybe they're doing something else."

Chu Wanning froze. "Doing what?"

Only then did Mo Ran realize what had slipped out. He coughed and turned aside. "Nothing."

But Chu Wanning caught the implication. His eyes flew wide, then narrowed dangerously in aggravation. "What the hell are you thinking! Get back on the horse! Let's go!"

Mo Ran opened his mouth to say, *It's not a horse, it's a wolf*. But when he saw Chu Wanning's baleful expression and the flushed tips of his ears, he swallowed his words. Watching Chu Wanning reach up and mount

Naobaijin in one swift motion, the picture of unmatched refinement and beauty, Mo Ran felt almost rueful. He yearned after him with such single-minded fervor. Wouldn't it be perfect if Chu Wanning were his, he thought—he'd fuck all the strength out of this man's body. Chu Wanning wouldn't be able to mount any horse or wolf; he'd only be able to collapse into Mo Ran's arms.

This idea was too outrageous, too heinous—Mo Ran unconsciously shook his head. Chu Wanning caught the movement. "What?" he snapped. "Why're you shaking your head? Don't tell me you think I'm wrong to reprimand you?"

"No no, Shizun's instruction is always correct. I was thinking too much."

But I wasn't thinking about Nangong Si and Song Qiutong doing any of that ridiculousness. The person I was thinking of was you…

Mo Ran had another thought. Ah, wouldn't it be great if he could break Naobaijin's legs? Then Chu Wanning would have no wolf to ride. Perhaps he'd do Mo Ran the honor of climbing onto his own black-clawed wolf.

Mo Ran wanted so badly to hold him again. He was like a man about to die of thirst, reminiscing about the sweet dew he'd once sullied… He galloped at Chu Wanning's heels the whole way back, drowning in these irrepressible imaginings.

When they returned to Moonwhistle Fields, Song Qiutong and Nangong Si were there waiting. Song Qiutong sat on the ground, one luminous, jade-like ankle extended in front of her, streaked with traces of blood. Halfway through the ride, she had forgotten Nangong Si's warning to tuck her legs in and been cut by some brambles. Though it was a minor injury, Nangong Si refused to ignore it and brought her back at once to dress the wound.

Mo Ran glanced at her legs and feet. Those feet were objectively pleasing to the eye, but they couldn't compare to Chu Wanning's. How pathetic it was that he had really liked Song Qiutong's feet in his past life.

He must've been blind.

These days, he felt that every aspect of Chu Wanning was wonderful, no matter where he looked. Even those unforgiving, scornful, coldly glinting eyes now simply felt proud and distinctive, just the way Chu Wanning ought to be. He was just so handsome—too damn

handsome. So handsome that even being subjected to Chu Wanning's glares, reprimands, and eye rolls left Mo Ran ecstatic in the face of such beauty.

"I willingly made a bet, so I'll willingly accept the loss." Nangong Si forthrightly passed the bracelet, worth a thousand gold, over to Chu Wanning. "This is for Zongshi."

Chu Wanning peered at the trinket. "Septimal-star spiritual stones are excellent for nurturing the spiritual core. It's precisely what I need—thank you very much."

Irked, Mo Ran muttered, "I'll get you something even better next time."

"What?" Chu Wanning hadn't caught Mo Ran's words and turned to look at him.

Mo Ran gazed into those phoenix eyes, so close he could see his own face reflected in Chu Wanning's pupils. The two of them were near enough to practically blur into one. That tight feeling in Mo Ran's chest abated slightly as he grinned. "I said, when I see something better for Shizun, I'll buy it for you."

"Okay."

Chu Wanning's blunt assent made Mo Ran even more gleeful. He cast a petty glance at Nangong Si. Of course, Nangong Si was completely oblivious—but this didn't stop Mo Ran from pitting himself against Rufeng's young master. Bursting with self-satisfaction, he wanted to crow to Nangong Si—*Shizun responds to your gifts with such a courteous "thank you very much," but not with me! You see, we're so close there's no need for him to be polite.*

Chu Wanning continued, "Remember to get a receipt from the seller, and I'll pay you back when I get the chance."

Mo Ran's internal crowing screeched to an unceremonious halt.

Nangong Si retrieved the ten freshwater groupers from the qiankun pouches and brought everyone to a little wooden hut on the fringes of Moonwhistle Fields. Outside was a stove covered in soot, complete with an assortment of pots and utensils. The wooden hut looked dilapidated, especially in contrast to the magnificent expanse of the grassy field—as if they were from two different eras.

Chu Wanning trailed his fingertips along the fence until he reached a

yak-hair flag tied to a post. The flag seemed to have endured the elements for many years, its once-vivid colors faded.

Nangong Si was collecting seasonings from the wooden hut when he saw Chu Wanning stop to examine the flag. “I tied that here the year Zongshi left,” he said with a smile. “It’s practically rotted away by now.”

Chu Wanning sighed softly and sat on a low stool carved from a tree stump. Nangong Si had been a small child when Chu Wanning served Rufeng Sect. Back then, Chu Wanning had often taken the boy on walks around Moonwhistle Fields, on which they’d stop by this hunting shack.

A fire soon roared to life. They roasted the groupers on fruit-tree branches, the rich juices emitting a mouth-watering aroma as they dripped from the crisp, seared skin into the flames. Nangong Si tossed six of the fish to the faewolves lying beside the wooden fence. He sprinkled the remaining four with salt and handed them out, one to each person.

Song Qiutong ate only a few bites before passing hers to Nangong Si, who’d already devoured an entire plump fish all by himself. “I won’t be able to finish it. Gongzi, please have the rest.”

Chu Wanning watched Nangong Si take the roasted fish and happily polish off a second helping. This Song Qiutong seemed gentle and deferential, he thought—a considerate person, nothing like the scarlet woman rumors made her out to be. Gossip really couldn’t be taken at face value.

As he mulled this over, a lotus leaf was pressed into his hand. It contained neat filets of fish with the bones picked out, the delicate, smoke-scented flesh steaming in the cold air. With some astonishment, Chu Wanning turned to see Mo Ran tucking away the silver dagger he always carried. “Shizun, have this,” he said with a smile.

“Where’d you get the lotus leaf?”

“I picked it when I was catching the fish.” Mo Ran pushed the fish toward him. “Eat while it’s hot. It won’t taste as good once it gets cold.”

Chu Wanning took the lotus leaf, his heart fluttering. “Thank you.”

It was true that he didn’t like eating fish with bones, and the tender, fileted grouper practically melted in his mouth. Chu Wanning ate bite after bite yet never found it too heavy. By the time he finished, the tea hanging over the fire had come to a boil. Song Qiutong rose to take the iron teapot off and poured everyone a cup. She respectfully offered a teacup to each of

the three men with both hands.

"Chu-zongshi, please have some tea."

Song Qiutong held the little porcelain cup in her fine, jade-white hands, her arms luminous as the moon, an eye-catching cinnabar mark on the inside of her wrist.

Chu Wanning recalled that at Xuanyuan Pavilion's auction, the pavilion master mentioned that Hanlin the Sage had placed a cinnabar dot of chastity on Song Qiutong's wrist—this must be it. If the mark yet remained, all talk of Song Qiutong's affair with Ye Wangxi was bound to be nonsense. Chu Wanning breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Nangong Si was a pure-hearted young man, like a wild horse on the plains or a solitary wolf roaming the wild, full of fighting spirit and vigor. Chu Wanning thought well of people like him. He didn't want Nangong Si to make a bad match.

Song Qiutong had made her way over to Mo Ran to offer him tea. He accepted the cup but put it aside without taking a sip. "Miss Song, I have something I'd like to give you," he said with a slight smile.

Chapter 157:
Shizun, on My Wedding Night Back Then, I Actually…

MO RAN PRODUCED a delicate bracelet sparkling with beads made from East Sea nacre and Xihe sunstone from Zhurong Peak. That it was an item of luxury was obvious at first glance.

"In your letter, you asked me for the carp spirit's lunar crystal. Unfortunately, my cousin has already used it to refine a sword. I didn't prepare any other gifts, but I bought his water-and-fire crystal bracelet for you—it should suit you perfectly."

"This…this is much too valuable; Qiutong couldn't possibly accept it…"

"Surely there's no reason to refuse a gift of congratulations?" Mo Ran chuckled. "What's more, this bracelet has a restraining effect on fire elemental spiritual energy, but it's only suited for ladies. If you wear it at Nangong-gongzi's side in the future, it should also moderate his spiritual power. It's a useful little item."

Song Qiutong turned her head to look at Nangong Si. After receiving his nod of approval, she took the bracelet in both hands and bowed deferentially. "Many thanks, Mo-zongshi," she said warmly.

The four drank their tea and chatted a while. Chu Wanning, by now quite invested in Nangong Si's big day, reminded him to take care with the wedding preparations and make sure every detail was in place—he wouldn't want anything to go awry at the last moment.

Nangong Si gulped his tea and tossed the empty cup idly in his hand. "Zongshi, don't worry. I make sure to check up on things every night." He grinned. "I'm grown now—I know where my responsibilities lie. Actually, just last night I found that Qiutong's dress robes were missing a pearl and got someone to fix it right away."

When he spoke of the wedding, a touch of shyness crept over his carefree face. He glanced over at Song Qiutong and smiled. "Qiutong will look gorgeous when the time comes."

These words fell on the ears of Song Qiutong's husband from a past life. Mo Ran absentmindedly poured himself a new cup of tea. Of course he knew that Song Qiutong was exceptionally lovely, a peerless beauty—

but so what?

Back then, in a ceremony at Dawning Peak, Taxian-jun had married the first empress of the cultivation world. Phoenix-patterned candles had burned bright on the night of the great wedding, but Mo Ran didn't spend it in the bridal chamber. He'd had too much to drink that evening. Amidst the hazy glow of the red candles and the blur of wedding veils, he tilted up his new bride's flushed, bashful face and stared down into it.

It was common, on important milestones, for people to feel regret. The passage of time washed over them, and they realized the world had changed before their eyes. Even this man who styled himself Taxian-jun was no exception. He felt suddenly that nothing was real. His gaze seemed to pierce the charming mist of scarlet around him and fix upon a wind-blown snowy sky from many years ago. When he had only rags to protect him from those freezing winds… When he had been on the brink of death from thirst and starvation, and someone had taken pity on him, had held out rice porridge for him to lap up…

When he'd first arrived at Sisheng Peak, anxious and scared… When he'd stood on tiptoe to pluck that haitang blossom beneath the round-bellied moon… When he'd knelt before Chu Wanning, the willow vine striking down on his body…

Had he ever imagined that one day, he'd trample upon the world's cultivators and rule all under the sun?

"Husband, what are you thinking about?" His bride's vermilion lips parted, and her gaze lingered upon him. Even her exhalations were cloyingly sweet, as sweet as the position to which he'd ascended today. He seemed to have everything. A beauty, status, power… What was left for him to be displeased about?

He couldn't name a single thing. Yet he felt hollow, as though he stood at the chilly summit before a sea of downturned faces, all murky and indistinct. He pushed his way through these simpering figures as they showered praise and admiration upon him, as they prostrated and fawned, their faces indistinguishable from each other. A voice charmingly called out to him, tender as the petals of a peony. "Husband… My husband…"

He felt disgusted. He wanted to flee those surging waves of sycophants, but the saccharine sound of that voice wound around him like syrup.

Without warning, he shoved Song Qiutong away. His lovely new

bride was no match for this rough treatment; she crumpled onto the bed spangled with dragons and phoenixes in the scarlet bridal chamber, gold and silver ornaments jingling in her hair.

Trapped in this mirage of glittering jewels, Mo Ran found everything distorted, unreal. That shimmering golden glow was like hellish fire; that brilliant crimson candle like tears of blood. He felt repulsed, but he didn't know who repulsed him—was it Song Qiutong? Or was it this version of himself who had changed beyond recognition?

He bolted out the door.

In the last lifetime, this was something known to precious few—that on the day of Taxian-jun's great wedding, the empress Song Qiutong was abandoned in the bridal chamber as Mo Ran, clad head-to-toe in gold and red, pushed open the door to the Red Lotus Pavilion. Song Qiutong's groom walked in, and after a time, the candles in the pavilion went out; he stayed the whole night through.

Only at dusk on the second day, when Xue Meng charged up Sisheng Peak to make trouble, did Mo Ran languidly open the door, straighten his disarranged clothes, and saunter over to the main hall, his face suffused with a sinful satisfaction.

Nobody beyond the walls of the Red Lotus Pavilion would ever know what transpired that night.

After bidding farewell to Nangong Si and Song Qiutong, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran returned to the guest courtyard side by side.

Voice carefully neutral, Chu Wanning spoke up. "Just now when Nangong said Song Qiutong was beautiful, why did you space out staring at her like that?"

"I was thinking how she'd look in wedding robes," said Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning was suddenly washed by a wave of jealousy. He shook out his sleeves and said, icy, "Preposterous. Who told you to concern yourself with someone else's bride?"

Mo Ran laughed. "Who said I'm concerning myself with her? I was just thinking that no matter how she looks in wedding robes, she wouldn't look half as wonderful as Shizun did."

Chu Wanning couldn't muster a reply. He'd been prepared to vent a belly full of anger, but instead a little wolf pup had licked his palm,

catching him off guard. His face went white, then red, and he couldn't get a word out for several long seconds. At last, he waved his sleeves and snapped, "Don't mention that ridiculous ghost ceremony ever again."

Mo Ran sighed to himself. *It's not like I brought it up—you're the one who asked. I don't want to lie to you. When I tell you how good you look, you turn all your fierceness on me. But even when you're fierce, it feels sweet. When I think of how I lost you… Chu Wanning, you could reprimand me with all your might for a lifetime, and it would still be like soaking in a jar of sugar…*

What can I do? I can't help but long for you.

Time flew swiftly by, and soon it was the eve of Nangong Si's wedding. Rufeng Sect was teeming with guests who'd traveled from all over—leaders and young masters from the major sects, wandering cultivators of the jianghu, and even some business moguls with no spiritual abilities whatsoever. All those who had waited until now to arrive crowded at the gates of the host city. Carriages and horses wove in and out of the throng, their canopies billowing like clouds. An endless stream of men and women decked out head to toe in finery drifted into the city until Rufeng Sect's main avenue resembled the flowing silver river of the Milky Way with the light glinting off of their silks and jewels.

Xue Meng's father had hauled him into the city to meet a lady cultivator around his own age.

"Wang-xianjun, long time no see! A pleasure indeed. Aiya, is this little Mantuo? She's all grown up now, how pretty. Come, Xue Meng, come here and give your regards to Wang-bobo."

Xue Meng reluctantly sidled over. "Hello, Wang-dabo," he blurted.

Xue Zhengyong smacked him upside the head. He kept smiling as he muttered through gritted teeth, "It's Wang-bobo, not Wang-dabo."[3]

"Ha ha ha, it's fine, it's all the same. The darling of the heavens is handsome as expected, the spitting image of you, Old Xue. Lucky man!"

After more of the same, Xue Meng was coerced into taking a stroll around the garden with "little Mantuo." Little Mantuo was sixteen this year, but so much for sweet sixteen: her demeanor was decidedly icy. After walking side by side with Xue Meng for some time, she proclaimed, "Surely Xue-gongzi understands what our elders intend by pushing us

together like this."

"Mn."

"Allow me to be candid: I'll take a walk with you, but I don't care for your personality, Xue-gongzi. So don't get any ideas."

"Oh… Wait, what?" Flabbergasted, Xue Meng stopped in his tracks, face ashen, and stared at little Mantuo.

The little coquette raised her chin and narrowed her eyes at Xue Meng, haughty and forbidding. "My heart is my own," she said coldly. "Even if you've fallen in love with me…"

"Are you *crazy*?" Xue Meng exploded. "Me?" He jabbed a finger at his own chest in disbelief. "Fall in love with *you*?"

"Why else would you be leading me down this little alleyway? Is it not because of your unsavory intentions?"

Xue Meng's volatile temper flared. "You should've told me your brain was full of holes!" Spitting in rage, eyes flashing, he couldn't help stammering, "I like you? *I* like *you*? I—"

"Why do you need to say you like me so many times? Pervert!" Little Mantuo was a principled young lady. She stamped her foot, lifted her head, and slapped Xue Meng soundly across the face.

Xue Meng was so mad, the world was tilting; after being slapped by this delicate hand for no reason, he was ready to spit blood. Were it not for Madam Wang's repeated exhortations to let women have their way, he would likely have pushed the young woman to the ground and pummeled her black and blue.

It was at just this moment that a man with pale eyes and a regal profile appeared at a distance. When little Mantuo spied him, her mouth fell open in disbelief and her eyes welled with tears. "Mei-gongzi!" she coyly called, before pelting toward that man.

This newcomer was Mei Hanxue, who clearly hadn't expected to run into anyone in such an obscure little alleyway. He was taken aback, and upon seeing little Mantuo coming at him full tilt, raised a hand to defend himself. The girl, caught off guard, ran headlong into a hastily conjured lightning-laced barrier. With a screech of alarm, she crumpled to the ground.

Mei Hanxue made no move to help her up. He looked down and furrowed his brow. "Miss, I'm afraid you have the wrong person."

“Impossible! How can that be… You promised me a gold spice sachet as a token of your love! You said I’d be ever in your thoughts from the moment you first laid eyes on me! You said once I turned eighteen, you’d marry me! Did you… Did you forget?”

Mei Hanxue eyed her but did not deign to reply.

“Mei-gongzi…”

“You really do have the wrong person.” Without another word, Mei Hanxue shook his head and strode away from the weeping girl.

Watching this scene unfold, Xue Meng felt at once furious and vindicated—furious over this dirty womanizer Mei Hanxue, who would pretend he didn’t recognize a girl the instant he pulled up his pants. No wonder this heartless villain only dared to walk along deserted back alleys during such an occasion.

At the same time, he felt vindicated. So it turned out little Mantuo had her heart set on this scoundrel Mei Hanxue, who was precisely as his name implied—flowery and frigid.[4] It was said this rogue had two faces: one he wore before he fooled around with a woman, and one after. Little Mantuo would be doomed for eight lifetimes if she’d fallen in love with *him*.

As Mei Hanxue strode toward Xue Meng, he narrowed his limpid eyes to cast Xue Meng a glance.

What do you think you’re looking at? Xue Meng thought. *What’s a jerk like you eyeing me for? You’re famous for being a dirty player, while I’m famous for being a great warrior—I’ve got plenty more clout than the likes of you.*

Xue Meng loftily raised his chin and glared sidelong at that jackass Mei Hanxue. He planned to huff in a very dignified and scornful manner the moment Mei Hanxue passed by.

What he didn’t anticipate was that Mei Hanxue would come to a halt before him and look at him coolly. “Why is your face so swollen?” he asked. “It’s a rather unique look on you, to be sure.”

Xue Meng had no time to stop the arrogant *“hmph!”* that came out like a runaway carriage. Mei Hanxue eyed him in the ensuing awkward silence. Xue Meng’s cheeks immediately heated. He turned away and snapped, “None of your business! I fell while I was walking!”

“Be more careful when walking in the future,” Mei Hanxue said

calmly. “It’s no small feat to come out of a fall with your face in that shape.”

With that, Mei Hanxue swept off, leaving Xue Meng rooted to the spot for several beats before he began to hop around in fury. “Mei Hanxue! You son of a bitch! Y-you stop right there! I’ll get back at you or die trying!”

Bursting with indignation, the rims of his eyes bright red, Xue Meng dashed out in such a rush that he ran headlong into someone’s chest. “What the hell!” Xue Meng cried, enraged. “Watch it; are you blind?”

He looked up and saw a tall, charismatically handsome man in green. The stranger’s robes were embroidered with a gold pollia motif, and his hair was bound up with the green jade ornamental crown of Guyueye. His lowered gaze was framed by long, delicate lashes. As he looked up, his eyes seemed to hold within them the misty rains of Jiangnan, set in a face so arresting it could steal one’s souls.

The man shoved Xue Meng away and straightened his hair and robes. Irritation was scrawled on his face as he smoothed the creases in his collar with slender fingers. It was then that Xue Meng noticed the silver ring engraved with a xuanwu tortoise shell on his index finger. He stared blankly for a moment, then exclaimed, “Jiang Xi?”

The sect leader of Guyueye, the richest man under the sun—Jiang Xi!

Although Jiang Xi was around the same age as Xue Zhengyong, his method of cultivation left him looking like he was yet in his twenties. He was exceedingly wealthy and exceedingly beautiful—no doubt a darling of heaven favored by the gods.

At the Spiritual Mountain Competition, Jiang Xi had been the only truancy among the leaders of the ten great sects. Xue Meng had wondered back then what this absent man looked like. Now, confronted with his distinguished and opulent presence, Xue Meng gawked openly.

Jiang Xi's expression was steady, yet his temper was anything but. "You dare call a sect leader by his given name? What a joke."

Xue Meng felt a hundred times more humiliated than he had with Mei Hanxue. "What, are people not allowed to call you by your name when you're old?" he angrily blurted. "Does everyone have to call you 'esteemed sect leader'? Even Nangong Liu isn't as full of himself as you!"

"Insolent whelp!" Jiang Xi thundered. "Whose disciple are you?"

"Why should I answer to you? Who do you think you are? Guyueye might be a bunch of monkeys who listen to your orders, but do you think everyone will bend to your will so easily? There's no way I'd tell you! If you ask me, you're just a—"

"Meng-er!" An elegant voice called out.

Xue Meng's mouth snapped shut as he stepped away from Jiang Xi and cast a glance behind him. Madam Wang had come at some point; perhaps she had overheard Xue Meng being insolent. She looked pale and nervous as she hurried to intercept her son. "Meng-er, be quiet and come over here."

Xue Meng gave Jiang Xi one more furious glare before shaking out his sleeves and walking over to Madam Wang. He lowered his head deferentially. "Mom."

Jiang Xi was still for a moment. He slowly turned and narrowed his eyes; despite their beauty, they flashed with a malevolent light. Casting a detached look at the mother and son standing before the white walls and black tiles, his mouth moved in a derisive sneer. "Then this must be the darling of the heavens, Xue Zhengyong's precious son, Xue Meng?"

Madam Wang remained silent.

Jiang Xi's lashes quivered, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they brimmed with disdain. "Truly Xue Zhengyong's son, with that level of self-discipline."

"Who said you could insult my dad?!"

"Meng-er!" Madam Wang yanked Xue Meng behind her before bowing formally to Jiang Xi, her face pale. "My son Xue Meng is too headstrong. I beg Jiang-zhangmen for his forgiveness."

"Heh, Jiang-zhangmen…" Like a viper, Jiang Xi savored these words in his mouth before slowly swallowing them. "It's no matter. He's

half Shijie's blood, so given your seniority, I might consider him an adoptive nephew…"

"Who wants to be your adoptive nephew! Take a good look at your own ugly-ass face and go to hell!"

"Meng-er…"

With a chilly laugh, Jiang Xi stared at Xue Meng, then slowly shifted his gaze to Madam Wang. Lowering her eyes, Madam Wang said, "Sect Leader, please don't joke around. I'm no longer a disciple of Guyueye. How could I be considered your senior?"

After a long moment, Jiang Xi nodded. "Very well." He continued, voice cold, "Very well, very well indeed. I've seen an old friend and her son today, and it's been a truly eye-opening experience. What a sordid place Sisheng Peak must be—a perfectly fine white magnolia has been spattered in mud."

Hearing Jiang Xi insult his mother right to his face, Xue Meng's blood rushed to his head. He dashed forward heedlessly. "Jiang Xi! Shut the fuck up! I'm gonna rip your mouth in half!"

Madam Wang, unable to hold him back, could only watch the situation spin further out of control.

A brilliant firework burst noisily in midair, and the time-keeping drums boomed. The voice of Rufeng Sect's master of ceremonies rang across the seventy-two cities with the aid of a sound-amplifying technique: "To all our esteemed guests, we kindly request the honor of your attendance at the welcome feast beginning this evening in Poetry Hall…"

Jiang Xi cast Xue Meng one last frigid look. Then he flicked his sleeves and turned on his heel, departing in a huff of rage.

Chapter 158:
Shizun Drinks Wedding Wine

IN THE GREAT SECTS, weddings were a three-day affair of feasting and wine. On the evening of the first day, before the ceremony itself, the hosts held a welcome dinner to receive all the guests arriving from afar. The evening's biggest attraction, however, was not the drinking table but the hunting grounds outside the hall. In adherence with custom, shortly after sunset a high-ranking elder would lead three spiritual deer with antlers bound in red silk into the forest. The groom's father would then select twenty-two unmarried men and women to pursue them. Any guest who felled a deer would receive a prize of ten million gold. Ultimately, only filthy rich sects like Rufeng and Guyueye could afford to stage such opulent displays.

Poetry Hall was expansive, with soaring rafters and exquisite tiles adorning its towering rooftops. From within the hall, one could look out over the nearby hunting grounds shrouded in the twilit glow of the sinking sun.

The guests filed in one after another, each congratulating Nangong Liu. Their host courteously returned each greeting regardless of the guest's status and invited them to take a seat. It took an hour of hectic activity to seat all the guests. The ringing of bells heralded the start of the evening feast.

"I wonder which guests Nangong-zhangmen will send down to the forest for the hunt."

"Aren't they drawing straws? Anyone who gets picked is real lucky. Think about it—bring down one deer and you'll win ten million gold. Even the hunters who don't will have their pick of the other spiritual creatures or magical fruit in the forest. What could be better?"

Amidst the hubbub, the doors of the hall swung open. Nangong Si and Song Qiutong stepped onto the mezzanine together, a striking pair in interweaving red and gold. Hand-in-hand, they approached the sect leader.

Nangong Liu rose to his feet and nodded with a smile. In a clear and carrying voice, he announced, "Honored guests, you've come from far and wide, from every sect and mansion, to attend my son's wedding here at Rufeng Sect despite your manifold commitments. This humble one is truly

fortunate."

"Sect Leader is far too courteous," the guests below recited obsequiously.

"The young master and mistress make a beautiful couple; it's a match made in heaven!"

Hear! Hear!

These words of flattery were near identical to those of Mo Ran's fanatical supporters at his wedding in the past life. Hearing them again now, he felt a wave of yawning boredom. He absently scanned the crowd and quickly spotted Ye Wangxi sitting beside the Shuanglin Elder.

Ye Wangxi's eyes were downcast, his appearance unpretentious as ever. He seemed wholly focused on his meal, never once lifting his head to look at Nangong Si. Both his expression and manner were as usual, or maybe even more placid than usual. Perhaps it was because he'd faced so many hardships that he had already resigned himself to his powerlessness against fate.

Mo Ran suddenly thought of a pagoda lantern he used to like at the night market when he was young. The make of that lantern was exquisite, every eave and tile crafted in fine detail. But because the artist demanded a considerable asking price, he had been unable to sell the lantern despite its beauty.

Needless to say, Mo Ran couldn't afford it either. But almost every night, he'd wait for the night market to open, then run over to the artist's stall to gaze at the lantern. The shadows fled from its light, its radiance solemnly illuminating his pitch-black eyes.

One day, a young man and woman arrayed in fine silks came to the market. The young woman took a fancy to the lantern. The instant she coyly voiced her admiration for the trinket, the young man beside her produced money to buy it.

Mo Ran had craned his neck to watch the artist take down the pagoda from the wooden stand where it had hung for so long. He passed it to that young woman with both hands. The lantern's flickering light spilled over Mo Ran's wistful face one last time. Then it gradually vanished along the night market's main avenue, lighting the steps of that beautiful couple.

At the time, Mo Ran had been miserable, but he hadn't made a fuss. He was not unlike the Ye Wangxi of the present. In truth, from the

moment they laid eyes on the pagoda lantern, they knew that such a precious object could never be theirs. In truth, each night when the pagoda's light shone over them, they were already readying their hearts for all the ways they imagined they would lose that brilliance. It wasn't that they had come to terms with the impending loss. Rather, they had known all along how things would end, so they had never dared claim it in their hearts to begin with.

"Come come, it's time to draw straws, come now!" Rufeng Sect's head servant carried a great bronze vessel engraved with swirling branches up to the elevated dais. With a wide grin, he held it above his head as he presented it to Nangong Liu. "Sect Leader, the time is most auspicious. Please do the honor of drawing the lots!"

"Let's go! Nangong-zhangmen, go on and draw!"

Nangong Liu laughed. "Then this humble one has no choice but to accept. I shall pick twenty-two bamboo straws, and I ask those twenty-two young heroes to do me the honor of participating in our hunt tonight. If anyone wishes to decline, please speak up now. Thank you, thank you!"

After a few moments, the parents of some girls from minor sects went up to ask Sect Leader Nangong to remove their daughters' names from the vessel on account of their low cultivation and little courage. Xu Shuanglin looked over at Ye Wangxi and asked with a lazy smile, "Does Little Ye-zi want to play? If you do, I'll pull some strings."

"I don't," said Ye Wangxi. "Yifu, I must trouble you to request the sect leader take my name out of the running."

"That won't do. You'll get ten million gold if you win."

Ye Wangxi gave him a long, silent look.

Xu Shuanglin's temperament was wilder than his foster son's. After some thought, the corners of his mouth curled in a devious smile. "If you're not willing to go, then I will."

"Yifu…you're already over forty…"

"So what? I look young enough. Watch me take all three deer and rake in thirty million gold. Never turn down easy money."

Wrapped up in his own plans, Xu Shuanglin failed to notice his foster son's crestfallen mood. He pulled on his shoes and sauntered over to Nangong Liu, then whispered some words in his ear. Everyone was under the impression that he was withdrawing Ye Wangxi's name. Who

would've thought his love for money was such that he wanted a go himself?

Nangong Liu drew the names of guests for the hunt. The Shuanglin Elder stood beside him, taking the wooden sticks from the sect leader's hand and languidly announcing them one by one. "Shen Feng, Lin Sheng, Qu Yanran… Oh? Impressive—the darling of the heavens, Xue Meng."

Twenty-one hunters were quickly named. Before the last straw could be drawn, the shameless Shuanglin Elder blithely raised a hand. "I'm the last one, me and my old bones. Please go easy on me."

Nangong Liu knew this elder's personality and didn't try to stop him. He just laughed helplessly and handed each participant a firework. "Hunters, these fireworks will serve as your signal. When three have gone off, all three spiritual deer will have been felled, concluding the hunt," said Nangong Liu. "I'll be waiting at Moonwhistle Fields to welcome you back and bestow a prize of ten million gold upon the winners."

At this, the audience burst into raucous applause and shouted encouragement at their kin and acquaintances.

Still smiling, Nangong Liu continued, "In addition, on behalf of my son, I will award ten faewolves to the first-place winner. Seal a blood contract and they're yours to take home!"

Faewolves! These precious spiritual beasts were almost impossible to procure, even on the black market. And ten of them, no less. The entire hall burst into life. Someone jumped up and yelled to his sectmate who had been selected: "Shixiong, it's all up to you! If you win, I'll polish your boots for a year!"

The whole room erupted in laughter.

Not to be outdone, a lady cultivator cried brassily, "Take them all down, Shige! If you win, I'll dual-cultivate with you!"

"Wow—now that's amazing, ha ha, where's this spicy lady cultivator from?"

The cheerful laughter inside Poetry Hall bubbled up to the heavens. Even those who had been indifferent at first now lifted their wine cups to watch the spectacle, eyes shining with anticipation.

Amidst the buzz of voices, Mo Ran rose from his seat and said to Chu Wanning, "Shizun, I'll go with Xue Meng to the hunting grounds. You can stay here and enjoy the feast. Wait for me to come back."

“Go ahead,” Chu Wanning replied. “Tell Xue Meng to be careful—he’s always too rash.”

“Okay.”

Mo Ran and the twenty-odd hunters passed beneath the bright lanterns of the magnificent hall. Chu Wanning watched the gallant figures of those young men and women fade into the vast, dark night and tipped his head back to down his wine in a single draught. Thirty million gold was practically at their fingertips. Sisheng Peak would soon have the money to pave roads of spiritual stones in the lower cultivation realm, he thought. He had utmost confidence in his disciple.

Minutes after the youths entered the forest, before Mo Ran had even returned from seeing off Xue Meng, the first bright red firework burst in raucous colors in the sky. Nangong Liu clucked in surprise and sighed. “Would you look at that. I haven’t finished this cup of tea, and someone’s already caught the first deer. I wonder whose disciple it is? Heroic, truly admirable!”

Bitan Manor’s Li Wuxin was sitting at Nangong Liu’s elbow. He stroked his mustache and said with a smile, “If my distinguished fellow guests are so inclined, how about a spot of genteel betting? Out of these twenty-two talented youngsters, to whom will the deer fall in the end? I’ll raise fifty thousand to liven things up for Nangong-zhangmen.”

The crowd voiced its hearty assent, and twenty-two wooden sticks were shortly arranged along the length of the table, each marked with a contestant’s name. Placed below them were strips of red silk on which the gamblers would write their wagers.

Xue Zhengyong turned and muttered to Chu Wanning, “How is Bitan Manor only putting down fifty thousand gold? Is that Li geezer so poor?”

“Small bets beget cheer, large bets beget ruin,” replied Chu Wanning.

Xue Zhengyong chuckled. “How about some cheer then?”

Chu Wanning leveled him with a piercing look. The hairs on the back of Xue Zhengyong’s neck stood on end and he shrank back. “Okay okay, I know you don’t like it, so—”

“What good is cheer?” The Yuheng Elder untied his money bag and tossed it onto the table. “If you’re going to bother at all, go for ruin,” he

said, face devoid of expression.

Xue Zhengyong stared at him like he'd seen a ghost. "How much?"

"Three hundred thousand."

"…That much? What if you lose?"

"I can't lose," said Chu Wanning. "Do you want to pave the roads with spirit-refining stones or not? With the money we win, we could pave more of them in the villages that are badly afflicted by miasma."

"Are you sure? What if Xue Meng fails?" Xue Zhengyong asked.

"He won't. You should know your own son better than I."

Taking in Xue Zhengyong's uneasy silence, Chu Wanning declared, "If I lose, it's on me. If I win, it's all yours. Go ahead."

One after another, the silks filled with names. Even the small sects that hadn't intended to wade in were tempted in the end, putting in a bit of money to try their luck.

Amused by the sight, Nangong Si stood to place his own bet. Song Qiutong held him back. "Husband, why are you playing too?"

"I'll win some money to buy you jewelry."

Song Qiutong fell silent and slowly lowered her jewel-like face. A lock of raven hair fell over her forehead, and she looked endearingly abashed. Chu Wanning happened to catch this sweet scene between the betrothed couple and immediately turned away in embarrassment. Thus did he miss the brief unease that flitted over Song Qiutong's face.

Nangong Si took the brush with a grin and walked the length of the table. He had leaned over to record his pick when he heard a shrill noise behind him. Nangong Si's reflexes were sharp as any wolf's; he whipped around in an instant and leapt back, dodging a flash of snow-white light that brushed his cheek as it flew past. It burrowed into the golden redwood of the hall's main pillar, showering the floor in powdery splinters.

"What is it!"

"An assassin!"

"Watch out! Sound the alarms!"

Sharp whistles wailed all across the seventy-two cities. Poetry Hall, which had moments ago resounded with song and warm chatter, was thrown into disarray as guests drew their swords.

Nangong Si's gaze was stormy, eyes glinting with ferocious light. He swiped at the blood on his cheek, strode over to the pillar, and looked up. An ordinary arrow had somehow nailed itself deep into the solid redwood. It bore a small bamboo tube, which Nangong Si removed with a grave expression. When his sharp canines tore at the wax seal, a letter fell out. Stiffly, Nangong Si unfolded it and began to read. Suddenly his expression changed completely. He gripped the letter as he read it over and over again in disbelief, his whole body trembling, fingertips tearing through the paper.

"Si-er, what's wrong?"

Nangong Si raised his head and wrinkled his nose. The countenance he showed to the hall was ferocious, almost panther-like in its savagery. "Slander!" he cried, moving quickly to destroy the letter.

But Nangong Liu was a step quicker. He lifted his hand and immobilized his son with spiritual energy. "What's all this? Let me see."

"Don't look at it, Father, it's complete nonsense!"

Nangong Liu paid him no heed. With a wave of his hand, he instructed an attendant to take the letter from Nangong Si's paralyzed fingers. After taking it in hand, he glanced down to read. Immediately he shot an ugly glance at Song Qiutong. Without waiting for the crowd's reaction, he tossed the letter into the fire, where it turned to ash. He proclaimed with a dry laugh, "My son is right, that paper is filled with falsities. I can't imagine who would pull a prank so tasteless, it's really too…"

"Really too *what*?" A stranger's low, husky voice rang out from a corner of the eaves.

Everyone paled. Ye Wangxi drew his sword and moved in front of Nangong Si. Chu Wanning rose to his feet as well, eyes fixed on the corner the voice had come from.

Rufeng Sect had pulled out all the stops for such an important occasion and had charged their most accomplished disciples with the hall's security. Yet this person had somehow made it to the very top of Poetry Hall, alerting neither gods nor ghosts and leaving no one the wiser until he spoke. Plainly this was no ordinary man, and he couldn't be underestimated.

"Nangong-zhangmen, my kind reminder not to let your son marry such a faithless woman was clearly given in vain. Not only do you refuse

my counsel, you even say my letter is full of lies. Rather eye-opening."

His last words were still ringing through the hall when a black shadow flashed. By the time the onlookers registered it, a man was standing in the center of the great hall, hands clasped behind his back amidst the crowd.

"Aahhhh!"

"Run! Quick, run!"

Those nearby turned pale with fright and backed away like a receding tide. A wide berth instantly opened around the man. Shixiong shielded their shidi and shimei, sect leaders shielded their disciples, and those in their prime shielded the young.

That black-garbed man wore a sinister bronze mask and a cloak black as ink. "Why are you running?" he asked dryly. "If I were here to kill someone, this hall would be a bloodbath. Just stay where you are."

Chapter 159:
Shizun, I'm Most Afraid of Tianwen

NANGONG LIU WAS OUTWARDLY CALM, but a sheen of sweat had appeared on his forehead. As he assessed this stranger's abilities, Nangong Liu realized the man wasn't bluffing. His panic grew. In an attempt to salvage the dignity of the world's foremost cultivation sect, he put on a brave front. "Who are you, sir? What do you want, charging into Rufeng Sect after nightfall?"

"I told you. I'm here to remind you not to let your son marry a woman he oughtn't."

At these words, the guests exchanged furtive glances. Rumors of an affair between Rufeng Sect's Ye Wangxi and Song Qiutong had spread through the streets and alleyways; everyone had heard them. The only people still in the dark were probably Nangong Si himself and, it seemed, Nangong Liu.

But the wedding invitations had been sent, and the marriage contract drawn up. If they backed out now, where would that leave Rufeng Sect's reputation? Nangong Liu's lips quivered, and he let out a snort. "As long as my son likes the person he marries, it's no one else's business."

The black-clad man laughed. "Sect Leader is so generous. Perhaps you don't care whether Song Qiutong's heart belongs to the Nangong family or the Ye family after all."

Song Qiutong was terrified. Face deathly pale and lovely eyes wide, she cried, "You slander me!"

"Do I? Shouldn't you of all people know just what sorts of naughty things you and Ye Wangxi have been up to?"

Ye Wangxi hadn't expected to hear his own name. Startled, it took him a long beat to appreciate what the man in black was implying. Rather than get angry, his first reaction was to burst out laughing. "What nonsense is this?"

"It's not nonsense. Every word is the truth. I've seen it with my own eyes." The black-clad man continued in a measured tone. "You spared no expense to save Song Qiutong at Xuanyuan Pavilion—the entire cultivation world knows this. One wonders—what was your intention

spending so much money to bring a beauty home, Ye-gongzi?"

"I found her in terrible circumstances. Was I to stand by and do nothing?"

"All right, you couldn't do nothing, so you saved her. Couldn't you just set her free? Why keep her at your side, even taking her back to Rufeng Sect to be your handmaiden?"

"That Miss Song is a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast is known to all. If I had simply released her, unscrupulous actors would've targeted her at once. I brought her back to Rufeng Sect so she could have a safe place to stay."

"So you gave her somewhere to stay. Ye-gongzi must truly be a virtuous ascetic, to spend so much time with a beautiful woman without crossing a single line."

The man's words dripped ridicule, but Ye Wangxi didn't look ashamed in the least. "My conscience is clear," he stated.

But how would anyone believe him? People always judged the intentions of others by the measure of their own experiences. Most of those present were from the upper cultivation world. Had they obtained a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast for themselves, they would have endured being beaten black and blue in order to shield the prize in their arms for use in dual cultivation or direct consumption. No one believed Ye Wangxi could be innocent. The crowd exchanged glances, faces filled with scorn. The originally tense atmosphere shifted, now permeated with a gleeful curiosity.

"Sir, I think you're looking for trouble and trying to defame Rufeng Sect." Nangong Si's voice was dark. "Whom I marry has got nothing to do with you. Enough. Piss off back to wherever you came from."

"I'm trying to do you a favor here, Nangong-gongzi." The man in black paced around the hall, coming to a stop near Song Qiutong. He laughed at her and said, "Miss Song, your husband trusts you blindly. No wonder you can stand here without a touch of unease and fancy yourself the young mistress of Rufeng Sect."

Song Qiutong wasn't nearly as calm as the other two. "How dare you impugn my virtue!" she cried nervously.

"Between you and Ye-gongzi, what virtue is there to speak of?" the black-garbed man asked brazenly. "You willingly waited upon him after

he saved you. You thought no one noticed the private affair between you —how could you know that I was watching from the shadows? If you didn't want anyone to find out, then you shouldn't have…"

Song Qiutong cut him off with a sharp cry. "You're lying!"

"If I'm lying, why are you shaking so hard?"

"I-I'm being bullied… I…" She looked at Nangong Si anxiously. "Gongzi…"

Nangong Si crossed the hall to Song Qiutong and stood before her, shielding her. Eyes wolfish, he leveled a dark and chilling stare at the man in black. "I'm warning you to stop making false accusations."

"You'll know whether my accusations are false after I finish speaking." The man laughed. "Nangong-gongzi, your beautiful Miss Song has a red birthmark on her left thigh, isn't that so?"

Nangong Si blinked in astonishment. "You…"

"About the size of a grain of rice, scarlet, not dark red—the color of blood. If I didn't see her and Ye-gongzi doing the deed with my own eyes, how would I know such a specific detail?"

"This…"

"Gongzi!" Song Qiutong cried out in panic. She tugged on Nangong Si's sleeve and said tearfully, "It's not true, it's not true, he's making it up… He must have spied on me when I was bathing…"

"Why would I care to watch you bathe?" the man cut in, sounding annoyed. "I'd rather go to Sisheng Peak to see Yuheng Elder."

The tale of the female disciple peeping at the Yuheng Elder in the bath was another anecdote enthusiastically passed around the streets of the cultivation world. Hearing it in this context, bolder members of the audience peeked over at Chu Wanning in amusement, only to quickly avert their gazes at the murderous look on his face.

The man in black circled Nangong Si and Song Qiutong. He clapped his hands and chuckled, as if something had just occurred to him. "That's right, I remember now. Back when Ye-gongzi bought Miss Song, Hanlin the Sage personally placed a dot of chastity cinnabar on her wrist. If Miss Song is indeed unsullied and every word out of my mouth filthy slander, then this dot of cinnabar must remain on her wrist."

He paused, then turned to smile at Song Qiutong, who was trembling

miserably from head to toe. “Miss Song, if you’re innocent as you claim, go ahead and show everyone that cinnabar dot. How’s that sound?”

With sudden understanding, Nangong Si turned and consoled Song Qiutong. “It’s okay, just show everyone, you…”

All the blood had drained from Song Qiutong’s lips, and her face was paper-white. Shivering, she stared blankly ahead. After a moment, Nangong Si asked hesitantly, “What… What’s wrong?”

Song Qiutong released Nangong Si’s hand and took a step back. Pulling her sleeve over her hand, she tearfully shook her head. “I… I can’t…”

Nangong Si’s eyes widened with realization, but he couldn’t get a word out.

The man in black sneered. “What’s wrong? Scared?”

“No, that’s not it… I don’t know…” Song Qiutong crumpled to the floor, her tears falling like rain. “I’m not sure why, I don’t know…” she wailed mournfully. “Let me go…I’m begging you…”

She clasped her sleeve tightly over her hand to hide it from view, but her efforts made her predicament only more conspicuous. She might as well have said flat out that the chastity mark on her wrist had faded, quite as the man had said.

The young lady had been betrothed as a virgin, but before the wedding had been celebrated, the red mark on her wrist had disappeared. Even if she jumped into the Yellow River, she wouldn’t be able to wash her reputation clean.

The man in black had taken a breath to continue when a clear, cold voice rang out. In the light of the lanterns, Chu Wanning’s figure stood tall and undaunted as he said, “This mark was present on Miss Song’s wrist a few days ago, which contradicts your timeline for this supposed affair. Perhaps you’re deliberately sabotaging these young people.”

For some reason, the black-clad man’s eyes flashed with a wordless bafflement. His overbearing manner inexplicably seemed to melt away when he turned to face Chu Wanning. After a long silence, he heaved a sigh. Some of the onlookers thought—was it their imagination, or was this man who’d just been spouting such damning words now speaking in a tone that could only be described as *indulgent*?

“Chu-zongshi’s not wrong. But I didn’t say they were already

involved back then. I only said they'd had an affair. If we were to pinpoint the timing, I'd say it was in the past few days."

"Absurd…" muttered Ye Wangxi.

Chu Wanning's expression was grave, his manner imposing. "Empty words aren't proof. I'll be the judge of whether you speak truth or lies."

"You…"

As he spoke, Chu Wanning's fingertips sparked with golden light. The man's pupils contracted, and he dodged sideways, barely managing to escape the holy weapon Tianwen as it ripped through the air.

"What does Chu-zongshi mean by this?" the man in black asked, both exasperation and amusement in his voice. His martial abilities were excellent; even Chu Wanning couldn't immediately ensnare him with the whip. Yet the man didn't strike back, letting the willow vine pursue him around the entire hall. The previously tense atmosphere unexpectedly turned comical.

"Hey—don't hit me, I'm not done talking," the man beseeched, almost affectionate.

"If you have complaints, take your mask off, then talk!" Chu Wanning shot back sternly, swordlike brows drawn low.

"If you want, I'll take it off for you later. I can't right now."

"Why not!"

"I'm too ugly. It's so bright in here; everyone will be frightened if they see me."

The man in black continued to flee, side-stepping Tianwen. He saw that Chu Wanning's movements were growing increasingly ferocious. Sensing things were headed south, he flitted behind a wooden pillar to dodge another dazzling golden lash. "Ye Wangxi, are you a gentleman or not?" the man shouted. "Today, I'll show everyone your true face! You bought a woman for dual cultivation and forced Song Qiutong to serve you. You overstepped your station to defile your master's wife! You—you filthy brute, you two-faced beast!"

"Ridiculous," Ye Wangxi retorted furiously. "What garbage are you spewing?!"

"Have I misspoken? Can you possibly not know why Song Qiutong's chastity mark is gone?" the black-clad man yelled as he evaded

another strike. “Just days ago she knelt before you and said she was already Nangong Si’s betrothed; she begged you to let her go and leave her alone. Not only did you refuse to listen, you even said—”

Ye Wangxi’s face was white with rage. “What else did I say? Let’s hear it!” he squeezed out through gritted teeth.

“Have you forgotten? Need I remind you? You said”—the man in black changed his tone to mimic Ye Wangxi’s cadence—“Miss Song, I staked everything for you, only to become a bystander to your happiness. Now that you’ve earned Nangong-gongzi’s favor, you wish to make a clean break with me? Keep dreaming.” He added a wild laugh to the end, sounding like a complete delinquent.

Ye Wangxi glared at him in speechless silence.

Chapter 160:
Shizun, Do You Remember the Voice-Changing Spell from the Inn Back Then?

AT THIS, SCORN SURFACED on many of the guests' faces. Their gazes darted between Ye Wangxi, Nangong Si, and Song Qiutong.

"What a scumbag…" someone said softly.

"Why isn't Nangong-gongzi angry yet?"

"If Miss Song really didn't have a choice, then… Ah, for a girl like her to be caught between these two formidable gongzi, it's no wonder—what could she have done?"

As the man in black let these murmurs swell, posture indifferent, Tianwen lashed out and caught him off guard. Fortunately, he managed to jump swiftly out of the way. But though he wasn't ensnared nor seriously injured, Tianwen had managed to rip his cloak, sending blood into the air. He stifled a cry of pain and avoided Chu Wanning's willow vine with renewed diligence as he continued to besmear Ye Wangxi.

"Ye-gongzi, Miss Song won't confess because she's worried she'll damage the friendship between you and Nangong-gongzi. But you can't deceive the heavens. Have you really not an ounce of shame in your heart? Will you not bow your head and apologize for your wrongdoings?"

Incensed as Ye Wangxi was, he found this, too, ridiculous. "I have committed no wrong," he replied.

"You haven't? So you're saying the blame lies entirely with Miss Song? Perhaps she didn't resist you because you threatened her. Are you trying to say it was she who seduced you? And not you who forced yourself on her?"

Nangong Si, who had remained silent all this time, turned and looked down at Song Qiutong, extending a hand to help her up.

But Song Qiutong thought he was reaching down to check the chastity mark on her wrist. When she had woken that morning, she'd discovered the cinnabar had vanished from her skin. She'd immediately panicked—but she had no way to explain it, and any attempt would only make matters worse. She had imagined that since she was about to be wed to Nangong Si and the cinnabar would fade anyway, it would be safe to

say nothing for the next few days and avoid any misunderstanding.

Who could've guessed that someone would come to ruin her…

She thought about how Ye Wangxi had indeed saved her, and how she had served as Ye Wangxi's handmaiden. She also thought how the cinnabar had disappeared, and how the man had clearly identified the red birthmark on her leg. She had nothing with which to defend herself. Her mind filled with a buzzing blankness; she found herself cornered.

Amidst the chaos, she raised teary eyes and took in the teeming crowd, their gazes filled with scorn and pity as they whispered among themselves. She saw Ye Wangxi standing alone, the guests peering at his solemn visage with disdain.

Chu-zongshi's willow vine was still chasing the black-garbed man across the hall. It didn't stop the man from continuing to shout: "Ye Wangxi! The grudges between us run deep! Today I'll expose you for the hypocrite you are! You had an affair with the young master's wife and forced yourself on an innocent young lady—how vicious, how reprehensible!"

As Song Qiutong stared, she saw, in a flash, her way out. Clearing her name now would be impossible. But the man in black sounded like he had a score to settle with Ye Wangxi and was willing to go to any length to destroy his honorable reputation. She couldn't shoulder the crime of adultery—but if she went along with this tale and claimed Ye Wangxi had forced himself on her, then at least…

"That's right, it was *him*!" she cried hysterically.

Nangong Si's hand froze in midair. Standing stock-still and stupefied, he looked at her in astonishment, as if he couldn't believe his father's right-hand man would actually tarnish his fiancée.

Hiding her face in her hands, Song Qiutong choked with sobs. "It—it was Ye-gongzi who humiliated me, he…he forced me… I never agreed to it…"

Nangong Si stared at Song Qiutong beneath the flickering candlelight, his gaze likewise flashing bright and dark. After a long moment, he dropped the hand he'd offered back to his side. "Do you know what you're saying?" he asked, voice hoarse and full of sparks.

When she saw his fury, Song Qiutong grew only more anxious. "Gongzi, I'm sorry…" she wept. "I was afraid you wouldn't forgive me…

so…I didn't dare say anything all this time… I was so scared that you and Ye-gongzi would fall out if I said something. The sect leader values him so much; what good would it do Rufeng Sect if you two became enemies?" She prostrated herself as she spoke, her long sleeves sweeping over the ground as her narrow shoulders shivered, dejected and pitiable.

"Qiutong really didn't know what to do… I didn't dare bring this up to the sect leader, so no matter how I was humiliated, I tried to hide it… Gongzi, I'm too ashamed to face you, but…but I've always been sincere with you…"

But Nangong Si, now deathly pale, took a step back, shaking his head as he repeated, "Do you know… Do you know what you're saying?"

Song Qiutong's fine, dark locks cascaded over her beautiful shoulders, bending the light from the lanterns like silk. Like this, she looked all the more heartrendingly lovely. "Qiutong was wrong," she sobbed miserably. "I shouldn't have hidden it from you, but I was so alone, I…"

Nangong Si cut her off with a ferocious snarl. "Do you have any idea what you're saying!"

"I…" Song Qiutong shuddered and raised her head. Her perfect features were damp, her delicate cheeks streaked with tears, her lips trembling. "I…"

"How could you? How could you dare… How could you bring yourself to do something like this?"

Everyone wrinkled their brows and exchanged glances. One of the guests murmured, "I'd heard Rufeng Sect favors men at the expense of women, but I never thought Nangong Si would blame Miss Song, an innocent victim, instead of Ye Wangxi. How disappointing."

"I'll say. He really doesn't know right from wrong."

Chu Wanning had recalled Tianwen upon hearing Song Qiutong's admission and now watched the scene in the center of the hall. Nangong Si's reaction bewildered him. In his memory, Nangong Si was willful and headstrong, but his conduct was always proper, and he wasn't an unreasonable person. If this story was true and worthy of investigation, then the target of that investigation should be Ye Wangxi, not Song Qiutong. And yet all of Nangong Si's anger was directed at Song Qiutong alone… Why?

In all the crowd, Mei Hanxue was the only guest sitting calmly in his seat, drinking his wine and watching the furor. Had Xue Meng been there, he would've seen that this Mei Hanxue was nothing like the man he'd run into earlier. The rakish personality from Peach Blossom Springs had returned—contained in his eyes was all the dancing merriment of spring, and there was a smooth charm to his every move.

Song Qiutong continued to weep and push all the blame for the scandal onto Ye Wangxi. Ye Wangxi, too shocked by her accusations to speak, stared wide-eyed at the woman he'd saved from Xuanyuan Pavilion.

"Qiutong was weak and frightened in the face of Ye-gongzi's mistreatment. I would give my life to prove my innocence. Qiutong is but drifting duckweed; Gongzi gave me everything, and now…I know my mistakes… I…will accept any punishment…"

After hearing her tearful confession, Nangong Si jerked his head up and closed his eyes. The lantern light, warm and lively, now illuminated the dark and stormy shadows on his face. His lashes quivered as if he were struggling to hold himself back. His hands were balled into fists, and his throat bobbed like the raging waves in his heart. As he stood silent, his cheekbones jutted sharply and the veins in his temples bulged; his bones shuddered, and his blood blazed through his body.

He restrained himself until he could bear it no more. With a furious cry, he unsheathed his sword and cleaved the table in front of Song Qiutong in two. Cups and dishes scattered. "Song Qiutong, did you know…the thing I've always hated the very, *very* most, the thing I will never tolerate, is *lying*!" He abruptly yelled, "Ye Wangxi!"

"…Young master."

"Ye Wangxi, get over here!"

Ye Wangxi didn't move, nor did he speak.

Nangong Si turned his head, his eyes wet and red. "Come *here*!"

Ye Wangxi came to him at last. Those watching expected Nangong Si might plunge his sword into Ye Wangxi's chest, opening the belly of this duplicitous beast in order to rip out his heart and throw it to the ground. They watched the scene unfold with bated breath.

Chest heaving, Nangong Si stared at Ye Wangxi. At length he said, voice rough, "Remove the voice-changing spell."

“Voice-changing spell?” The guests looked at each other in shock. “What does this have to do with a voice-changing spell?”

“No clue. How odd—why would Ye Wangxi use a voice-changing spell? Is his real voice so awful it will scare people off? Or is it somehow embarrassing?”

Ye Wangxi dropped his gaze to the floor. “Young master, I can no longer remove it.”

Nangong Si stared at him blankly. “What did you say?”

“I’ve used the voice-changing spell since I was thirteen. It’s been ten years—the spell has penetrated my spiritual core.” Ye Wangxi paused, then continued calmly, “I can never recover my original voice.”

Nangong Si took a step back in astonishment. After a long moment, he turned his eyes on the inscrutable man occupying the sect leader’s seat of honor. “Father?” A murmured question.

Nangong Liu spoke at last. “Si-er, it really is a pity, but…
Ye Wangxi used the voice-changing spell of his own volition. This turn of events has been unexpected. Don’t take it to heart.”

“But…”

Nangong Liu stepped down from the platform to stand behind the assembled guards with his hands behind his back. “Your father knows that you and Ye Wangxi are childhood friends. I have appreciated his loyalty these recent years. Regardless…he has sullied Song Qiutong, forgotten his station, and deceived his superiors—these are crimes punishable by death.”

Against all expectations, Nangong Si’s response was to exclaim in shock: *“Father!”*

Nangong Liu waved his hand and a ray of blue light shot out to enclose Nangong Si in a restraining barrier. Nangong Si stood frozen for a moment, then began to howl furiously and pound against the barrier. But it was to no avail—this was Rufeng Sect’s Admonishment Barrier, a technique passed down through the sect over generations.

Rufeng Sect had an unfortunate history of usurpation via patricide, and thus the sons of sect leaders all signed a blood oath with their fathers in their youth. This barrier specifically allowed fathers to confine their sons and would stand firm for up to an hour. However powerful Nangong Si was, this barrier was impossible for him to escape. His words, too, were

sealed within; whatsoever Nangong Si yelled, there was no way for those without to hear it…

Though things had come to this point, it was still preferable to admit to an affair between Ye Wangxi and Song Qiutong than to reveal other secrets of Rufeng Sect. Nangong Liu approached the man in black and cupped his hands in greeting. “This humble one has no knowledge of what’s passed between you and Ye Wangxi, but I am grateful for your reminders today. Otherwise, misfortune would have befallen my family.”

“Nangong-zhangmen is too courteous,” the man in black said blandly.

“Guards! Arrest Ye Wangxi at once! Detain him—”

“Hold it.”

Nangong Liu grew immediately uneasy. His face creased in an indefatigable smile. “Sir, do you have more advice to offer?”

“I was just thinking that your esteemed son only said a few words about a voice-changing spell. Sect Leader, why are you in such a rush to lock up Ye-gongzi?”

“Ahem, this is a private matter for Rufeng Sect, so I’m afraid I can’t divulge details…”

The man in black’s voice held a smile. “When it comes to Rufeng Sect’s reputation, the esteemed sect leader certainly doesn’t hesitate to sacrifice a pawn to save a rook. Poor Miss Ye, who has risked life and limb in service of your sect for more than a decade. Today she is framed despite her innocence, all to preserve your family’s dignity.”

Before the rest had time to process these words, Nangong Liu’s expression changed.

Mei Hanxue chuckled softly where he sat. He filled his cup with wine, drained it, and set it back down.

In the glow of the lanternlight, Nangong Liu’s face was a waxy yellow. Finally he asked with an insincere smile, “Miss Ye? Sir, you…”

The black-clad man’s eyes were bright, and his voice echoed clear through the great hall. He slowly said, “Ye Wangxi isn’t a man at all.”

Chapter 161:
Shizun, I'll Take You Flying

FOR A MOMENT, all was silent. Then the hall erupted in confusion. The guests' faces paled, their gazes converging on Ye Wangxi where he stood, eyes closed and head bowed, not making a sound.

Not a man?! This handsome and stalwart young hero was… actually…a *woman?*

The black-clad man's words were like water dripped into a hot wok, instantly producing a wave of searing heat. There were gasps of astonishment and an explosion of buzzing conversation like the harsh sizzle of oil in a pan.

"Ye Wangxi is a woman?"

"Heavens… How could this be…"

"No wonder Nangong Si didn't put the blame on her; he must have known! That means Song Qiutong was really…"

"She was just trying to save her own skin by framing an innocent person!"

"How awful! If they never slept together, then she's accusing him just to clear her name?"

"No way though, how can Ye Wangxi be a woman? I can't tell at all…"

Nangong Liu's eyes flashed with cold light. He stared into the inky pupils of the man in black. "Sir, there's no need to stand here and lie. Where's your evidence—"

"If your conscience is clear, then release Nangong Si," said the man. "Fortunately, your esteemed son may be headstrong, but he's a gentleman to the core. Not a heartless man like you."

Face shining with greasy sweat, Nangong Liu stood in silence, hands curled into fists. "What's wrong?" the man in black asked coolly. "Go on, release him."

Nangong Liu swept his sleeves aside. "An outsider like you has no place telling me how to discipline my unworthy son—the cheek of you!"

Whether or not Nangong Liu would admit that the man in black told the truth, the facts were plain from the way he spoke. Even those who originally hadn't believed now began to waver. They scrutinized Ye Wangxi's handsome face again, searching for any hint of femininity.

A clear voice called out from within the hall. "Nangong-zhangmen, you're in the wrong here."

The crowd turned as one. Mei Hanxue stood beneath the flickering light and shadow draped in a luxurious fox-fur coat, the very picture of poise. Smiling, he continued, "Miss Ye is valiant, but she is without a doubt a woman. Esteemed Sect Leader, since you're a man, you ought to favor the fairer sex. And since you're of the older generation, you ought to be magnanimous toward the younger. How can you bully a girl like this for the sake of Rufeng Sect's reputation?"

As he spoke, he crossed unhurriedly to the front of the hall. "I'm not ashamed to admit that I was lucky enough to meet Miss Ye at Peach Blossom Springs. I thought her gallant and lovely, no willowy waif," he said with a small smile. "I was smitten. Sadly, I offended her with my careless words. She turned me down and we had a small disagreement. After tasting Miss Ye's brilliant moves, how could I help but be impressed by Rufeng Sect's long line of heroes, with its lady cultivators being no exception? But although I had regarded Miss Ye's sect highly, after witnessing the sect leader's behavior today… Heh, if you ask me, Rufeng Sect doesn't deserve such a beauty."

"Mei-xianjun, you and Ye Wangxi met so briefly; it's only natural you would be mistaken." Nangong Liu's expression was glum, but his teeth remained bared in a smile. "Out of deference to Kunlun Taxue Palace, I won't argue with you—but I advise you not to show any further lapse in judgment." This time he didn't sound so calm.

The man in black chuckled. "Mei-gongzi's amorous exploits are legendary. If he can't tell whether someone is a man or a woman, I'm afraid there's no one in the world who can."

Nangong Liu was incensed. "Sir, were you not just criticizing Ye Wangxi for humiliating Song Qiutong? Yet now you say Ye Wangxi is a woman!" He snapped: "They're all lies to compromise the integrity of my Rufeng Sect, to ruin my sect's name!"

"If not for this plan of mine, how would Nangong-gongzi come to see Miss Song's true character?" the black-garbed man replied. "If he

married the wrong person, he would have to live disgusted for the rest of his life."

"But your explanation makes perfect sense! Not to mention, if Ye Wangxi is a woman, how did the cinnabar on Song Qiutong's wrist disappear?"

"What's the point in asking me this question? Why don't you ask her yourself?" The man in black sneered. "After all, your Rufeng Sect has thousands of male disciples. If the esteemed sect leader has the time, you can interrogate them one by one—you're sure to get a satisfactory explanation."

This was a matter of Rufeng Sect's reputation. Though no one in the crowd made a sound, it was impossible to hide the scorn and curiosity on their faces. Their eyes were like thorns pricking Nangong Liu from behind. He stood unmoving for some time, then turned to bellow at Ye Wangxi, "Come here!"

Ye Wangxi silently acquiesced.

"Out with it—did Miss Song fabricate this story or not?" Nangong Liu stared down into Ye Wangxi's face, betting it all on the final bargaining chip in his hand. How could he not know that Ye Wangxi had deep feelings for his own son? She wouldn't want Rufeng Sect's good name to be blackened. "Tell everyone the truth!"

Ye Wangxi had ever been obedient, always the most biddable piece on his chessboard. Nangong Liu could recall clearly the day Ye Wangxi, then only thirteen years old, had received the order to come before him in Rufeng Sect's dazzling great hall. The doors had shut, leaving the two of them alone inside. He had looked down from his ice-cold throne at this girl of thirteen, who still had a child's figure. She wore a short, jade-green jacket with a small silver bracelet at her wrist, and her hair was tied with a satin ribbon.

"Wangxi," he said to her with a smile, "you must know why I've summoned you today."

Ye Wangxi knelt and kowtowed before him. "Yes, Honored Leader."

"Your yifu has suffered several severe injuries. He can no longer serve as the commander of the shadow guard. As his foster daughter and Si-er's childhood friend, you're the only one I can trust with this responsibility."

Ye Wangxi didn't rise. She calmly remained in a kowtow, her slender neck showing beneath her braid like a lamb baring its throat for slaughter.

"You're an outstanding talent, destined for a bright future," said Nangong Liu. "It is my wish to make you the chief of Rufeng Sect's shadow guard, with command over one of the seventy-two cities in the future. You'll be a boon to your yifu, and indispensable to Si-er. From now on, he will stand in the light while you stand in the shadow—together, you'll usher in Rufeng Sect's next century of glory."

He paused. "However, it's fine if you refuse. Your yifu can hold out a while longer, and I can search for a better candidate. I know this will ask many sacrifices of you, so don't force yourself if you are unwilling."

After speaking his piece, Nangong Liu shifted on the seat of honor and waited. This girl had no parents and no one else to support her. He was assured of the outcome. He only waited for her to nod.

At last, Ye Wangxi sat up straight and looked at him coolly. In that instant, Nangong Liu felt a chill run up his spine—it was as though this girl's gaze had penetrated straight through his schemes and false smiles. But in the next moment, Ye Wangxi said, "Yifu gave me my life. To repay his kindness, I'm willing to do anything."

After a pause, Nangong Liu sighed. "This is truly an unfair thing for me to ask of you."

Ye Wangxi replied calmly—indifferently, even. "It is I who should thank the sect leader for the honor."

"However," Nangong Liu was already moving on. "Rufeng Sect has always valued men above women. Women are, after all, weak and soft-hearted. In this world, only men have what it takes to control the masses and command a city. Wangxi, you're a clever girl—you ought to know what's required."

Ye Wangxi was silent a moment. Then, facing Nangong Liu with an icy expression, she pulled the bracelet off her wrist and untied the ribbon from her braid. She shrugged off her jacket, leaving only her pure-white inner robe. Finally, she shook out her braid and gathered her hair into a high ponytail. The sunlight streamed from the windows to fall on her straight back and resolute brow. Although her figure was yet immature, she had already the air of a tall pine or a cypress.

"Very good. You must present yourself this way henceforth,"

Nangong Liu said. “But don’t forget,” he reminded her, attentive to every detail, “there’s the matter of your voice.”

Ye Wangxi looked downward. She had noticed the pair of golden shears before her seat when she entered. She took them up and swiped their blades ruthlessly across her throat.

Vivid blood dripped.

“Let my old voice be forever extinguished.” She slowly pronounced the words of the incantation before closing her eyes and tossing the shears at his feet, their golden blades now streaked with blood.

Nangong Liu stared at them for a long moment. “Good, good. From today forth, you are Rufeng Sect’s Ye-gongzi, the successor to the shadow city’s commander. As for Si-er, I’ll remind him to be a bit nicer—”

When Ye Wangxi opened her mouth, her voice was already that of a young man’s. “Sect Leader, I humbly ask this: don’t let my yifu bear his worries alone anymore. I will share the burden with him.”

Nangong Liu knew Ye Wangxi’s character too well. It had been ten years since she started her seamless masquerade as a man. When she reached puberty, she secretly took medicine every day, privately enduring its painful effects in order to develop her current masculine figure. In Nangong Liu’s eyes, Ye Wangxi was a dog Rufeng Sect had raised. To repay them for her upbringing, she would never betray them.

Ten years ago, blood had spattered across the floor when she’d cut her throat to alter her voice forever. Today, she wouldn’t let him down either. He was gambling that Ye Wangxi would oblige him. As long as Ye Wangxi herself said she wasn’t a woman, even if no one believed her, what could they possibly do?

It seemed the black-clad man had come to the same conclusion. He strode over to Ye Wangxi and raised a hand to block her way. “Nangong Liu, Miss Ye has already offered her passion and youth to Rufeng Sect. Now that you’re out of excuses, should she sacrifice her life too?”

Nangong Liu was about to argue when an orange light shot into the distant night sky and exploded in a shower of sparks. Another hunter had brought down a spiritual deer.

Yet in the face of these secrets of Rufeng Sect laid bare, who cared which youth that deer had fallen to? It no longer mattered who won second place—the eyes of all were locked on the center of the great hall, where chairs were strewn across the ground and the main table split in two. The mysterious black-clad mastermind stood between Nangong Liu and Ye Wangxi. The groom of the evening had been trapped in a barrier by his own father while his bride knelt on the floor with a face marred by tears, shaking with silent sobs. Between the accusations of adultery, the bride and groom falling out, a man revealed to be a woman, and now Rufeng Sect’s leader refusing to admit the truth—all was beyond the onlookers’

wildest imaginations. The events of the night were sure to be the topic of lively discussion in tearooms and taverns across the land for the next several years. Who would spare a thought for those three pitiful deer?

Thus no one noticed the dark red crack slowly splitting the sky above the forest.

A cacophony of fireworks went off in quick succession, twenty signal flares chasing away the darkness like a bright sea of blood. Crows and sparrows startled into flight, cawing and chirping as they fled into the depths of the night. Only now did the attendees in Poetry Hall realize aught was amiss. One after another, they rushed to the railing to look toward the forest.

"What happened?"

"Why did everyone's fireworks go off?"

"Look over there! Up in the sky! What the…?"

"…A Heavenly Rift!"

"It's a Heavenly Rift!"

For a fleeting second, all was still as death within the hall. Then a flurry of alarmed cries and shrieks rose from the crowd. "A Heavenly Rift! How could a Heavenly Rift open in the upper cultivation world?"

"It's right above the hunting grounds!"

"Shixiong! My shixiong is still in there!"

"Zizi!"

The guests were packed together like a school of fish in a pond, their panic scattered bait that churned the water into stormy waves. There was no point trying to manage the sect's scandal any longer—its secrets were open to the entire jianghu. In an effort to maintain some dignity, Nangong Liu cast a voice-amplifying spell and bellowed, "Ladies and gentlemen, don't panic! It's merely a Heavenly Rift to the ghost realm! You are all guests of Rufeng Sect; no harm will befall you!"

So saying, he summoned his sword with a wave of his hand. Nangong Liu stepped onto the hilt glowing with blue light and rose into the whipping night winds. "Guards from all five divisions of Rufeng, follow me to the forest, investigate at once! Elders and disciples, defend Poetry Hall and protect our guests!"

He hastily led the guards toward Moonwhistle Fields on their

swords, as if relieved to find an excuse to escape the black-clad man's interrogation. As for the disaster that was the wedding, he let it lie.

"Everything was fine—how did this happen so suddenly?"

"A Heavenly Rift has never opened in the upper cultivation realm before. Wh-what's going on here?"

These cultivators of the upper cultivation realm, accustomed as they were to living like princes, waited anxiously upon the jewel-encrusted balcony. Facing a Heavenly Rift that had appeared out of thin air was a responsibility far too dreadful. It was one thing beheading a lone monster or two, but a Heavenly Rift was a different matter entirely. If the rift opened into the upper levels of the underworld, perhaps only ordinary ghosts would escape. But if it were anything like the rift at Butterfly Town five years ago, it would open straight into the bowels of hell itself.

The guests shivered, remembering that even a great zongshi like Chu Wanning had lost his life in that terrible battle. They crowded fearfully against the vermilion balustrade to survey the red crack snaking across the sky.

Chu Wanning rose to his feet. "Sect Leader, the color of this rift isn't right," he said to Xue Zhengyong. "It's likely to access the lower levels of the underworld when it opens. I'm worried about Xue Meng and the others—I'll go check on them."

He walked right to the front of the balustrade, the pale blue hem of his formal robes sweeping the ground. As the crowd looked on in astonishment, he leapt onto the dark tiles of the neighboring roof using qinggong. His solitary figure vanished swiftly into the distance.

"Yuheng!" Xue Zhengyong called. But Chu Wanning had already disappeared into the lightless night. Xue Zhengyong cursed under his breath. He was about to leap after Chu Wanning when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

He turned and found himself face-to-face with a leering bronze mask. The black-clad man patted his shoulder and said quietly, "Uncle, stay here and look after Aunt. I'll follow Shizun; don't worry."

Xue Zhengyong was stupefied. "Ran—"

The man in black raised a hand lightly to his lips and shook his head.

At no point had Xue Zhengyong considered that the man in black might've been Mo Ran. Without waiting for Xue Zhengyong to question

him further, Mo Ran vaulted the railing with one hand and soared into the night like a falcon, his cloak a billowing cloud of ink behind him.

Before long, he reached the rooftop Chu Wanning had just leapt off. “Shizun!”

Mo Ran had made half the journey leaping between the rooftops with qinggong. Finding this too slow, he summoned his oathbound longsword and rode the wind to quickly catch up with Chu Wanning. He reached up and took hold of his mask, pushing that sinister bronze guise to the side to reveal an incomparably handsome face. “Wait up for me.”

Chu Wanning’s eyes flew wide. “It was you?”

“Get on. I’ll take Shizun by sword and explain on the way.”

Chu Wanning grabbed the hand Mo Ran offered and leapt nimbly onto the blade. He had intended to let go, but Mo Ran’s broad and sturdy hand tightened its grip. Mo Ran stood right behind him, and when he spoke, the blazing warmth of his youthful breath brushed the back of Chu Wanning’s ear. In the chilly night wind, it felt scalding.

“This sword’s powerful,” said Mo Ran. “It flies fast, so you’d better hold on tight, Shizun.”

The two of them sped downwind on the sword. “You planned that whole spectacle in the hall?” Chu Wanning asked.

“Mn. I heard quite a few things about Song Qiutong on my travels through the jianghu,” Mo Ran answered. “She’s not audacious enough for murder or other such crimes—but she’s the type who would throw rocks at someone at the bottom of a well. If she married Nangong Si and became the young mistress of Rufeng Sect, the sect would probably be even more rotten than it is now.”

Unexpectedly, Chu Wanning replied, “Rufeng Sect couldn’t be any worse than it is now.” Then he furrowed his brow and glanced at Mo Ran’s black cloak again, doubts materializing in his mind. “But how did you know Ye Wangxi is a woman?”

Chapter 162:
Shizun, I'll Stand with You

ABOUT THAT, SHIZUN—actually, I've known since Peach Blossom Springs."

The truth was that he'd known this since his previous lifetime, but there was no way he could tell Chu Wanning that. "When I was out on a walk, I overheard Mei Hanxue talking about her with someone from Taxue Palace." Mo Ran grinned. "Even back then, I trusted the accuracy of Mei Hanxue's judgment. And once I was watching her carefully, I became certain that Ye Wangxi couldn't be a man."

"Why?"

"Hasn't Shizun noticed that her collars are always pulled up very high? They cover her whole neck—it's a very unusual style. Most people might have one or two robes like that, but I've never seen her without one."

After some consideration, Chu Wanning said, "I never noticed."

Mo Ran used his free hand to demonstrate on Chu Wanning: "They come up to here, more or less." As he spoke, his fingertips inadvertently skimmed Chu Wanning's throat. The slight jut there was fascinatingly delicate; he couldn't help but quickly brush over it again. How fierce and untamable his shizun was, Mo Ran thought, yet he bared such a vulnerable spot to Mo Ran's fingers, let him touch—it was a thrilling feeling.

Thus diverted, Mo Ran forgot to look where he was headed. The sword flew so swiftly that by the time he registered Chu Wanning's "Watch out!" it was too late. With a loud crash, the sturdy sword sailed straight into an enormous tree.

The only coherent thought in Mo Ran's head was that he must keep a tight grip on Chu Wanning's hand. In his anxiety, a quiet "Wanning" escaped his lips, but he blurted it so quickly, and the tree split so thunderously, that Chu Wanning didn't hear.

Chu Wanning's head was spinning with rage. Mo Ran called *this* sword-riding? What was wrong with running along rooftops and planting his feet on solid ground? But no, Mo Ran had to show off!

The two of them tumbled heavily to the ground. Mo Ran was first to

land, his back thudding against the rocky, uneven forest floor. He wasn't really injured, though of course it hurt. Yet as he lay there, looking up through the branches at a sky full of twinkling stars, he suddenly felt rather pleased. Ha—thankfully it had been Chu Wanning who landed on him and not the other way around. He couldn't help but grin. Chu Wanning had struck his chest hard enough to set his ribs aching, but Mo Ran couldn't stop himself. His eyes crinkled, the corners of his lips curled, and his cheeks dimpled with deep pools of infatuation.

Chu Wanning, raising his head to find Mo Ran smiling like a fool, was incensed. "What are you laughing for? Did the fall knock your brains out?"

Mo Ran seized the chance to embrace him, holding him tight in his arms. It wasn't the right time or place, yet he had an irresistible urge to reach up and stroke Chu Wanning's hair. The thought had hardly occurred to him before he acted on it.

Chu Wanning was right. The fall had probably knocked his brains out. "Shizun…"

His fingers were light over Chu Wanning's hair. The darkness of the night seemed to have handed him a key, opening the box in which his secret desires were locked. Mo Ran could no longer contain the intimacy in his tone—it flooded through his words like a tidal wave.

So honey-sweet was Mo Ran's voice that Chu Wanning instantly froze, panicking. He scrambled to collect the pieces of his stern dignity. "What are you calling me for? Can't even ride a sword without falling—very skilled indeed."

Mo Ran sighed softly. He ran his fingers over those inky locks a final time and forced a quiet laugh. "Shizun is right to reprimand me. Could I please ask Shizun to get off of me now?" Internally, he was thinking, *Could you please lie in my arms a little longer?* But he obviously couldn't say that.

Face grim, Chu Wanning jumped nimbly to his feet and pulled Mo Ran up after him. "Are you all right?" he asked stiffly. "Were you hurt?"

"I'm fine." Mo Ran smiled. "I'm tough as nails—falling's no big deal."

Chu Wanning was about to say more when he noticed a wilted flower on Mo Ran's head, probably knocked off a tree in the fall. Chu

Wanning narrowed his phoenix eyes. “Your head…”

“Am I hurt?” Mo Ran reached up and felt his own head, but everything seemed fine.

“No—you’re blooming.” Chu Wanning plucked the flower from Mo Ran’s hair and handed it over expressionlessly. Self-conscious, Mo Ran rubbed the back of his head, the gesture full of bashful reticence. His smile grew only more brilliant.

Chu Wanning turned aside and cleared his throat. “If you’re fine, let’s get going.”

“On the sw—”

“No sword.” Chu Wanning turned to nail him with an angry glare. “Qinggong!”

“Qinggong it is then,” Mo Ran said with reluctance, and waved his hand to return the sword to his qiankun pouch.

The brush grew increasingly dense deeper into the forest; traveling by sword wouldn’t have been much faster anyway. Chu Wanning’s footwork was impeccable—he soared like the wind, skimming the ground as if it were water. As the cool breeze bathed Mo Ran’s face, the irrepressible excitement in his heart calmed some.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning’s voice sounded from up ahead. In a tone that implied that he couldn’t care less, he asked, “How did you know about the mole on Song Qiutong’s leg?”

Mo Ran stared blankly, caught off guard. With a *thump*, the mighty Mo-zongshi once again crashed face-first into a pine tree.

Giving him a long look, Chu Wanning said, “Do you have night blindness?”

“Nope,” Mo Ran groaned. “Sorry, just a little absent-minded today.”

Chu Wanning frowned slightly. Then, with a sudden realization, he flew into a rage. “Are thoughts of the mole on Song Qiutong’s leg so distracting? A cultivator must keep his heart pure and free from desire! If you’re so flustered after one glimpse of a beauty, what’s the point of cultivating at all?”

Mo Ran didn’t reply. He felt that Chu Wanning was quite correct, except he’d identified the wrong subject. The beauty he coveted wasn’t Song Qiutong, but the fiery-tempered man before him who was roaring

like an angry snow leopard.

He sighed and looked tenderly at Chu Wanning. “Shizun, Song Qiutong isn’t my type. You’re overthinking it. I heard about the birthmark on her leg from someone at the Xuanyuan Pavilion auction; I’ve never seen it myself. Don’t be mad.”

“Why would I be mad?” Chu Wanning paused. “Forget it. Let me ask you—if Ye Wangxi is a woman, then why did Song Qiutong’s cinnabar mark disappear? It can’t be a coincidence.”

“You’re right about that. Does Shizun remember the bracelet I gave Song Qiutong?”

“Mn.”

“I designed a spell and placed it on that bracelet.” Mo Ran hesitated. “It took me four days. I didn’t do a great job, but as long as Song Qiutong wore the bracelet, it would temporarily mask the dot of cinnabar Hanlin the Sage left on her wrist.”

Chu Wanning didn’t reply, but he looked unhappy. He felt that Mo Ran was still hiding something from him.

Mo Ran had changed a great deal during these past five years. And somehow, he’d picked up Chu Wanning’s own bad habit of meddling in others’ affairs. But Chu Wanning tended to intervene only when he stumbled across injustice, helping people where he could. For Mo Ran to pour so much effort into influencing this situation—even inventing a little spell to unmask someone’s true nature and prevent her from marrying into Rufeng Sect—was rather excessive. It made no sense for Mo Ran to have gone to such lengths unless there was some deep animosity between him and Song Qiutong, or an important connection between him and Ye Wangxi.

Mo Ran sensed Chu Wanning’s thoughts from his silence. Trailing close behind as they leapt through the air, he said, “Shizun.”

“What?” Chu Wanning replied coolly.

Mo Ran couldn’t talk about the events of his past life, but he also didn’t want Chu Wanning to worry. After some thought, he decided to share half his true feelings with Chu Wanning. “Shizun, Ye Wangxi is a really good person. At Xuanyuan Pavilion, she staked everything to save a woman she’d never seen until that moment. You know this too.”

“Mn.”

“But Ye Wangxi likes Nangong Si—could you tell?”

Chu Wanning hesitated, then said, “More or less. I saw that tonight.”

“That’s good. I learned of Miss Ye’s identity some time ago, so I’d long guessed her feelings. Until now, Song Qiutong wasn’t aware that Ye Wangxi is a woman, so she respected Ye Wangxi and harbored no malice. But if Song Qiutong married Nangong Si, Rufeng Sect might no longer keep this secret from her. Knowing Song Qiutong’s personality, she would definitely see another woman with feelings for Nangong Si as a thorn in her side.”

Mo Ran paused. In his past life, Song Qiutong had sensed what passed between himself and Chu Wanning. Overcome with jealousy, she had taken advantage of Mo Ran’s absence from the palace to extract all ten of Chu Wanning’s fingernails. What would happen if Ye Wangxi fell into the hands of a woman like this? It needn’t be said.

Such acts of cruelty were the kinds of evil deeds Song Qiutong committed. Never so heinous as to be noteworthy in themselves—rather, they were minor brutalities that allowed her to hide behind someone even crueler, waiting until they had finished to prolong her victim’s suffering.

Kindness and evil were similar this way. If the sky fell, the tallest person would always take the brunt of the blow. The most benevolent person would be crushed to death first—like Chu Xun, cast out by the vulnerable citizens he sought to protect. Likewise, the most malevolent person would also be the first destroyed—like Taxian-jun, wanted dead by all under heaven.

But if not for these small acts of evil that piled up across the torrents of time, if not for countless minor malefactors who cut one scar after another into Mo Ran’s body, would Taxian-jun—Mo Weiyu—have come to be?

“Aren’t you worried that you’re asking for trouble, sticking your nose in like this?” asked Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran knew he had shown too much of his hand. But in his past life, he had dragged Ye Wangxi into a sea of blood. Even if, in this life, the fate of Rufeng Sect had nothing to do with him, he owed Ye Wangxi a debt. So he had acted without hesitation, even at the cost of crossing boundaries and attracting suspicion. He wanted those he had wronged in the previous lifetime to live better this time around—not just Chu Wanning, but the others as well. He still hoped to atone for his crimes.

“Of course I’m worried,” said Mo Ran. “But since I knew the truth, I wanted my conscience to be clear.”

Chu Wanning still felt that Mo Ran had acted too rashly, but he didn’t pursue the matter further after hearing his answer.

At that moment, a sickly-sweet smell drifted on the wind, and a strong flow of spiritual power materialized in front of them. Before Chu Wanning could react, Mo Ran had paled. “This is bad,” he said in a low voice. “It’s the Zhenlong Chess Formation!”

“It’s coming from over there.”

The putrid smell pervaded the night air. Up above, ghosts had started to crawl out of the rift in the sky. Ahead, five pillars of light abruptly burst from the ground—metal, wood, water, fire, earth. Just like Butterfly Town.

Gaze locked on those lights, Chu Wanning said, “It’s him.”

Mo Ran of course knew whom he meant. Jincheng Lake, Peach Blossom Springs, Butterfly Town… Five years had passed since he’d last appeared—the mysterious figure pulling the strings, the fake Gouchen!

Mo Ran was immediately uneasy. This Zhenlong Chess Formation was completely different from last time. It wasn’t concealed or disguised at all…as though the one deploying it saw success within reach, all but certain.

The forest birds startled into flight and scattered in every direction. Chu Wanning sped toward the Heavenly Rift, Mo Ran right on his heels. As they drew near, they could see a stream of assorted fiends pouring from the crack in the sky. “The Infinite Hells…” muttered Mo Ran.

This rift was identical to the one in Butterfly Town five years ago—it also went to the Infinite Hells! In a panic, Mo Ran looked over and grabbed Chu Wanning’s wrist. “Shizun, don’t go over there!”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Mo Ran knew it was a silly thing to say. But in the course of two lifetimes, he had witnessed two Heavenly Rifts to the Infinite Hells, and their aftermaths were like a lingering nightmare. How could he not worry, now that he was faced with a third?

But words like *don’t go over there* were less than useless. A person’s character was a difficult thing to change. A man like Chu Wanning would never turn and run from a calamity; even if he were given a thousand chances to do so, he would refuse each and every time. Mo Ran looked at

Chu Wanning and found himself at a loss for words.

Chu Wanning glanced at him. “Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.” He raised his hand and summoned Tianwen. Its golden brilliance lit his slender figure as sparks scattered in all directions.

Mo Ran stared into Chu Wanning’s eyes and finally heaved a sigh. With a matching flash of dazzling light, Jiangui materialized in his palm. Its scarlet glow met Tianwen’s warm halo in an interplay of red and gold, twinned weapons that had crossed generations to meet, equal in might, matchless in power. “Okay, I won’t try to dissuade you. Whatever you want to do, Shizun, I’ll be right beside you.”

The spiritual light of their weapons shone in their eyes, resplendent. Fiery red blazed with molten gold, and molten gold was dyed fiery red.

“I’ll go with you.”

Chu Wanning studied Mo Ran’s dopey expression as he made his promise so sincerely. He felt both warm and helpless. Mo Ran’s eyes held too many emotions, no few of which had long overstepped the affection a disciple should feel for his master. Chu Wanning didn’t dare ascertain what exactly those emotions might be.

He reached up to prod Mo Ran on the forehead. “There’s no reward.”

Mo Ran stared for a moment, then reached up and pulled Chu Wanning’s hand away. It took everything in him to resist the urge to bring that hand to his lips and kiss it. “Mn, so there isn’t,” he grinned. “Let’s go.”

Lit by the red-gold glow of the holy weapons, the pair were like immortals passing through the gloom of night. They came quickly to the heart of the hunting grounds’ dense forest—Ganquan Lake. Chu Wanning and Mo Ran stilled their breathing and hid in the tangerine grove to study the rift. The spiritual power that nourished the lake had been cut off, and the water’s surface had frozen over in the bitterly cold night. On each of the four shores of the lake an array had been drawn, a shining weapon stuck in the middle of each.

“Four holy weapons of different elements?” Chu Wanning asked softly.

Mo Ran was taken aback by the sight. “So the holy weapon thefts over these past five years *were* related to him…”

“But he was using human hearts at Butterfly Town. Why switch arrays?”

Mo Ran was about to answer when Chu Wanning touched a finger to his lips. “Quiet—look over there.”

Mo Ran followed his line of sight. A group of Rufeng Sect’s guards walked slowly along the lake in the distance, mixed with all the young cultivators who had been chosen for the hunt. Spiritual power flowed from their chests, merging into a single stream that poured into the holy weapons of different attributes. The weapons, fed on these strong, pure energies, glowed brighter and brighter, the rays of their light stretching toward the heavens. As they watched, the seam in the sky split apart into a massive chasm. The portal leading to the Infinite Hells had been ripped wide open.

Mo Ran’s eyes widened. “What are they doing?”

“These guards are all unconscious and being controlled by the Zhenlong Chess Formation.” An anxious crease appeared between Chu Wanning’s brows. His eyes swept over the group on the shore and suddenly stopped. The color drained from his face, and he gripped Mo Ran’s shoulder with trembling fingers, not at all like his usual self.

“What is it?” Mo Ran turned. After searching a moment, he saw a familiar figure walking among the crowd. “Xue Meng?!” he exclaimed in fright.

Chapter 163:
Shizun and Bugui

LIKE THE OTHER TWENTY-ODD youths who had gone to the forest to hunt deer, Xue Meng was planted with a Zhenlong Chess piece. At present, he had stepped out onto the frozen surface of the lake, his expression empty and lifeless. As ghosts poured from the sky, he and the others were like a swarm of dauntless puppets: fearing neither pain nor death, they swung their swords at the evil spirits to keep them at bay. They paid no mind to the ghosts that ran off and disappeared into the night. The purpose of these chess pieces was obvious—they were guarding those five elemental arrays.

Chu Wanning couldn't bear to see his disciple manipulated like this. He tried to keep his cool and failed. As he was about to storm over, Mo Ran held out a hand and blocked his way.

"Let me go," Chu Wanning warned through clenched teeth.

"Don't go yet, wait a little longer—"

"How can I wait? That's Xue Meng!"

Chu Wanning was too strong for Mo Ran to restrain with one hand; he had no choice but to wrap both arms firmly around Chu Wanning and clap a hand over his mouth. He was determined to hang on, howsoever Chu Wanning struggled. "It's too soon to go over there now," Mo Ran said quietly, his breath hot against the back of Chu Wanning's ear. "Don't be so impulsive—listen to me, okay?"

He was rewarded with a fierce jab to the ribs. Mo Ran endured the pain as Chu Wanning pried away the hand covering his mouth and gasped for air. Phoenix eyes blazing, he said in a dark voice, "Spiritual power erodes quickly under the control of the Zhenlong Chess Formation! There are vicious ghosts on all sides—if anything goes wrong, he'll die!"

"That's not gonna happen."

Chu Wanning glowered wordlessly.

Mo Ran grabbed Chu Wanning's hand, his expression resolute. "I understand the Zhenlong Chess Formation. Trust me."

Seeing the solemn look on Mo Ran's face, Chu Wanning was somewhat surprised. Still, his breathing gradually slowed as he calmed

himself.

An eerie whistle sounded in the distance. They turned as one to see a vengeful ghost tumble out the sky and pelt toward Xue Meng—

Steel sang, and Longcheng's curved blade reflected the frosty moon as Xue Meng leapt up with the grace of a swallow and ran the ghost through.

"Living people embedded with Zhenlong Chess pieces will lose their spiritual energy and become weaker as time goes on. But he's been under its control for just a short while. He's fine for now."

Chu Wanning turned to look at Mo Ran with a frown. "How can you be sure?"

"Something I came across during my travels."

The ghost plummeted to the ground and rapidly disintegrated. Xue Meng lifted Longcheng, and black blood dripped from the blade's edge, leaving a crooked trail on the snowy ground. Beneath the moonlight, his expression was ice-cold, his pupils dull. Mo Ran felt his heart seize. Even in the past lifetime, Xue Meng had never endured the humiliation of being turned into a chess piece. Who had done this?!

Something was moving at the edge of the forest.

Mo Ran came back to his senses. "Looks like someone's arrived," he said quietly.

Two figures had emerged from the trees and now traversed the frozen lake, stopping before an array glowing with jade-green light. One held a holy weapon, but Mo Ran couldn't tell what type it was from his vantage point. Its wielder cracked the ice with a slap of their hand and tossed the holy weapon into the lake water at the center of the array. It lit up at once, its radiance piercing the darkness just as the moon emerged from behind the clouds. The clear, cold light fell on the desolate surface of the lake, throwing the pair in the center into sharp relief.

The first was a man in luxurious formal robes embroidered with gold. He wore a thick cloak over those robes, and a wide-brimmed bamboo hat that obscured his face from view. The second person's feet were bare despite the freezing weather, apparently heedless of the cold. They lifted their head to gaze at the Heavenly Rift into the Infinite Hells.

Mo Ran gasped. "No way!"

Xu Shuanglin?!

Mo Ran was confounded. Xu Shuanglin… The Shuanglin Elder? But this was Ye Wangxi's foster father, who had shielded his ward with his own body in the past lifetime. He was a good man who had died within a torrent of blades—how could it be him?

Chu Wanning didn't notice Mo Ran's confusion. He tapped Mo Ran on the shoulder and said in a low voice, "Keep moving."

"Why hasn't he appeared yet?" said the person in the bamboo hat who stood beside Xu Shuanglin. Mo Ran recognized Nangong Liu's voice at once. He was clearly anxious and impatient. "Goddamn it, did you get it wrong?"

"Let's wait and see," replied Xu Shuanglin.

"Hurry up! Tear the Heavenly Rift wider. Who knows when those guests will send their own people here. We'll run out of time if this goes on much longer!"

"Now now, I know you're impatient, but you know as well as I why we can't tear this Heavenly Rift wider. The situation spun out of control at Butterfly Town because we were too hasty, and we ended up attracting attention from all ten great sects. Try to control yourself or our efforts will be wasted again."

"Ugh!"

Xu Shuanglin closed his eyes. "Sect Leader, you went through so much trouble to obtain these five holy weapons of different elements to absorb the spiritual energies of these cultivators. You've held out for so many years—what's one more night?"

"You're right." Nangong Liu took a deep breath and nodded. "I've waited for five long years… No, more than that. I've been waiting for this since the day I became the leader of Rufeng Sect…" Nangong Liu muttered under his breath as he stroked the thumb ring beneath his sleeve, a gloomy light in his eyes. "I've been waiting all this time…"

"You needn't wait any longer."

A man's austere voice suddenly rang through the silence over the lake like thunder piercing the clouds. The two on the ice exchanged a look of alarm.

The bright moon hung in the sky, and the wind soughed through the pine forest. Upon a branch stood a slender figure, his long phoenix eyes narrowed in anger. His pale blue robes billowed in the wind. Their hue—

darker than his usual raiment—made his face look pale as icy jade, his handsome features exuding a bone-deep frostiness. “Nangong Liu, it’s over.”

Nangong Liu jumped in surprise. Through gritted teeth, he seethed, “Chu Wanning!”

Tianwen crackled with golden sparks. By its light, Chu Wanning’s flashing eyes appeared all the more threatening.

“If it isn’t the great Yuheng Elder, the Beidou Immortal! What a pity you didn’t stay dead after Butterfly Town. Now you’re here to ruin my plans again—you *bastard!”*

Chu Wanning blinked and frowned severely. “Then you were the one behind that calamity five years ago?!”

Now that he’d been exposed, Nangong Liu didn’t try to hide. He snorted. “So what if I was?”

Chu Wanning lifted Tianwen and brushed his hand over the willow vine, which began to glow by inches following the touch of his fingers, platinum bright. His eyes were falcon-like as he spoke. “Back when you sought a weapon from Jincheng Lake, the mythical beast in the lake asked for your wife’s spiritual core in exchange. You ordered someone to cut out her heart and toss it into the lake. I was so repulsed I wanted to kill you then, but you pleaded that Nangong Si was still young and couldn’t grow up without a father… You said you’d been possessed and felt endless remorse… You said that from that day on, you would live up to Rufeng Sect’s upstanding reputation and do no more evil. You…”

As his fingers passed over the last length of willow vine, there was a burst of golden light. Chu Wanning bit each word between his teeth. “Nangong Liu, you haven’t repented in the slightest! You’re a monster!”

“You blame me for this?” Nangong Liu let out a low laugh. “Chu-zongshi, why don’t you blame yourself for being so young and naïve back then? Weren’t you but fifteen? So innocent and artless—I only said a few words, shed a few tears, and threw Si-er forward as an excuse, and you let me off the hook. Heh, Zongshi, think about it—is the fact that I stand here before you not a direct consequence of you letting me walk free that day?”

Before his words had faded, a furious gale whirled to life. Tianwen tore through the darkness as it flew toward Nangong Liu. Light danced and flames lashed the heavens; in an instant, the sheet of ice over the lake cracked in two.

“Rise up!” shouted Nangong Liu.

A glimmer flared to life in the eyes of the puppets prowling the lake. One after another, they turned and rushed toward Chu Wanning. Xue Meng, the most able fighter among them, charged at the head of the group, and Longcheng and Tianwen met with a violent *clang*.

Afraid to injure Xue Meng, Chu Wanning withdrew his power and leapt back a few feet, his expression ferocious. “Nangong Liu, is this the extent of your skill? You force others to fight in your stead?”

“Ha, my skill is in making it impossible for you to touch me,” Nangong Liu said, laughing heartily. “Go on, fight them. They’re all very much alive—they’ve just been planted with my black Zhenlong Chess pieces. Chu Wanning, this little Xue-gongzi is your disciple, is he not? Can you really bring yourself to attack him? Your hands are tied; you may as well sit and wait for death! You’re no different than you were more than a decade past at Jincheng Lake! You’re powerless here, you have no choice but to let me go, you—”

His raving came to a sudden halt, his triumphant smile doused with a bucket of cold water, turning to smoke and ash.

Chu Wanning’s expression was far too calm.

Nangong Liu stared fixedly at Chu Wanning, unsettled by the steady assurance on his face. He shuddered, and a note of doubt crept into his voice as his mouth opened and closed. “What are you planning…”

Chu Wanning didn’t waste another breath on Nangong Liu. Gaze frigid, he brandished his holy weapon in one hand and yelled grimly, “Tianwen, Ten Thousand Coffins!”

Dozens of golden vines shot from the ground to bind each of the puppets who had been planted with Zhenlong Chess pieces. Another sturdy, massive vine soared out of the frozen lake, breaking through the waves like the legendary Azure Dragon. One elegant leap brought Chu Wanning atop the vine. Sleeves fluttering behind him, he sat upon it and raised a slender yet powerful hand. He intoned clearly, “Jiuge, come.”

Golden light surged from his palm and coalesced into a guqin on his lap, black as pitch. The instrument’s tail swooped up like a piece of living wood, its tip covered in lush leaves and haitang blossoms. Each string was a pure ice-white, threads of frozen mist diffusing from its surface.

This was the holy weapon Jiuge.

If Tianwen's most useful move was Wind, a wide-range killing blow, then Jiuge's was Ode, a healing technique that cleared the mind. As Chu Wanning lightly plucked the strings and played a few measures of Ode, bewilderment surfaced on the faces of the people under the control of the Zhenlong Chess Formation. They stopped struggling against Tianwen's vines and looked around in apparent confusion.

Nangong Liu was furious. He mouthed the words of an incantation, veins bulging in his forehead as he countered Chu Wanning's efforts. Seeing that he was outmatched, he frantically whipped around. "Shuanglin, disrupt the sound of his qin!"

"Me? Ah, okay, okay," Xu Shuanglin replied languidly. He sighed and turned helplessly toward the massive willow vine atop which Chu Wanning was perched. But before he could make a move, a black shadow darted before him.

Facing into the wind, Mo Ran raised a hand to block Xu Shuanglin's path with his whip. "Shuanglin Elder, care for a match?"

Xu Shuanglin blinked. He suddenly chortled. "Trying to stop me? You and your master really are cut from the same cloth. How very touching."

"The barriers," Chu Wanning said to Mo Ran without pausing his hands.

"They're all set."

Mo Ran's belated entrance wasn't for naught: he had been setting up barriers around the perimeter of the frozen lake according to Chu Wanning's instructions. Even if this Heavenly Rift wasn't so severe as Butterfly Town's, the vicious ghosts and evil spirits imprisoned in the Infinite Hells were twisted creatures with no conscience or inhibitions. The situation would be manageable if only a handful escaped into the mortal realm; otherwise, they would be plagued with bloodshed until all the fiends could be dealt with.

Mo Ran and Xu Shuanglin clashed, trading ten blows in the blink of an eye. "Shuanglin Elder, stop trying to get to my shizun," said Mo Ran. "I'm the one you should be dealing with."

"Seriously?" Xu Shuanglin cackled. "Are people only allowed to fight their assigned opponents nowadays? Young man, you're a bit too fierce—this uncle's getting too old for such rough handling."

Mo Ran stared at him, speechless.

“I’ll be destroyed if I keep fighting with you,” Xu Shuanglin continued cheerfully. “Xiao-gege, have some mercy. Go easy on me and let me play with your shizun instead, pretty please?”

Mo Ran had no idea how to face Xu Shuanglin. In his past life, he’d watched Xu Shuanglin die. He’d felt strongly that he wasn’t an evil person. Who could have guessed that in this lifetime, the masterminds behind the repeated calamities were Nangong Liu and this same Xu Shuanglin?

Mo Ran was lost in silence, pouring all his focus into the fight. Jiangui had the same interrogation ability as Tianwen—uncovering Xu Shuanglin’s true motives would be a simple matter if Mo Ran could get the vine around him. But Xu Shuanglin’s martial skills were formidable, far superior to Nangong Liu’s. As he floated like a dancing kite above the shattered ice of the lake, Jiangui’s red light struck glancing blows, never closing fully around its target. Besides, this man was Ye Wangxi’s foster father—Mo Ran couldn’t help but harbor some goodwill toward him even now…

Xu Shuanglin threw his head back in a wicked laugh. “Time’s up, Mo-zongshi. Apologies in advance.”

“What?” Mo Ran couldn’t make sense of his words.

“I’m off to bully your master.”

Xu Shuanglin raised a hand. Light flashed from his fingertips, and a ribbon of white silk hurtled toward Chu Wanning’s qin-playing figure with a murderous whistle.

Mo Ran cared for Chu Wanning more than anyone; he was immediately distracted. Eyes dark, Xu Shuanglin used his free hand to draw a fan from his waist and thrust it toward Mo Ran’s throat.

Blood splattered with a sinister rustle from the fan. Despite Mo Ran’s hasty dodging, the sharp edge of the fan had cut into his neck. Xu Shuanglin recalled the fan, now stained with Mo Ran’s blood, and flicked it downward.

As the drops of blood fell into the lake, a rich green glow lit its depths.

Mo Ran looked down. Within the central wood elemental array Nangong Liu and Xu Shuanglin had been guarding, the holy weapon was

submerged in the cold lake water. It had already absorbed all the life essence from the surrounding vegetation. With this drop of Mo Ran's blood, rich with spiritual energy, the holy weapon shone with a dazzling jade brilliance. The earth shuddered; after a breath of silence, a dark and ancient saber broke the surface of the water, blazing with fearsome light.

"The forbidden spell has been cast!" Xu Shuanglin yelled to Nangong Liu. "He's coming—quick, get below the Heavenly Rift! Prepare to fight! Prepare to fight!"

Prepare to fight? Were they summoning some fiend from the Infinite Hells just to *fight* him?

But Mo Ran had only a moment to entertain this thought. The instant he had a clear view of the holy weapon suspended midair, there was no room in his mind for aught else—he felt that he was the one lashed by a whip, completely immobilized and unable to utter a single word.

The weapon absorbing the wood elemental energy was none other than Taxian-jun's vicious blade of a hundred battles—the holy weapon Bugui!

A dull ache ripped through Mo Ran's chest. His vision flashed dark, and indistinct voices seemed to murmur in his ears. He was unable to catch his breath; it was as though all the blood he'd shed in his previous life had rushed out of the darkness to soak him to the bone. He was nauseated and dizzy, his heart hammering…

Xu Shuanglin took hold of Bugui. Mo Ran didn't think; he raised his own hand at once to summon the weapon. But no sooner had he sent out a thread of spiritual energy than the sound of Chu Wanning's guqin ceased. Mo Ran turned with a vague sense of foreboding.

His pupils contracted. *"Shizun!"*

How could he forget?! Chu Wanning's spiritual core was weak; the doctor at Xuanyuan Pavilion had said as much years ago. Bugui and Chu Wanning were in some way incompatible—the blade lashed out at Chu Wanning, affecting his already vulnerable core.

How could he have possibly forgotten!

Mo Ran broke his link with Bugui and leapt onto the massive vine. In the instant before the spiritual vine began to wilt, he snatched Chu Wanning, whose face was white with pain, and leapt back into the air. Cradling Chu Wanning in his arms, he touched down in the nearby

tangerine grove.

Behind them, Tianwen's Ten Thousand Coffins crumbled and fell away. Fortunately, the pawns within had become disoriented. Although they hadn't yet completely regained their senses, they no longer heeded Nangong Liu's commands. They stood with blank expressions, as if dreaming.

"Shizun!" Racked by anxiety and remorse, Mo Ran knelt in the snow, holding Chu Wanning as he ran gentle fingers over his face. Chu Wanning's brows were tightly knit. "Are you okay?"

A trail of blood trickled from the corner of Chu Wanning's mouth. Mo Ran hurriedly wiped it away, heart aching like it was being wrung out. He suddenly thought of the past life, when Chu Wanning had also lain in his arms like this at the summit of Kunlun Mountain, blood flowing from his eyes, mouth, and ears as he died. Then, as now, Mo Ran had wiped at the florid streams in a panic, unable to staunch their flow.

His heart felt like it was being drilled into. "Does it hurt a lot?" he asked, the rims of his eyes red.

Bugui's adverse energy had taken a heavy toll on Chu Wanning. To him, it had felt like the weapon's power had rushed into his chest and attempted to split it in two. Even more concerning was the broken succession of mirages that danced and warped before his eyes. With great effort, Chu Wanning shook his head to clear those blurry illusions and struggled to sit. He cast a glance in Nangong Liu's direction and the last bit of color drained from his face. Tapping into unknown reserves of energy, he grabbed Mo Ran's arm and rasped, "Over there—watch out!"

Mo Ran saw that Chu Wanning's face was the yellow of joss paper, his eyes flashing with astonishment, reflecting the light of the fire…

Wait, fire?

Mo Ran turned and saw that the rift was no longer disgorging small ghosts and demons. Instead, the roiling lava of the underworld spilled into the sky. The fire lapped at the heels of the escaping ghosts and incinerated them; the fiends had no chance to so much as scream before going up in a puff of dark flame.

What *was* this?

The lava hung suspended between heaven and earth like a waterfall of red and gold, flowing sluggishly, sinister and breathtaking at once. As it

reached the lake, the shards of ice and surging water caught like kindling. At the forefront of the crowd, Nangong Liu and Xu Shuanglin cast a tremendous water elemental spell to avoid being swallowed by the towering flames.

The lava flowed slowly but inexorably; it wasn't long before it neared those who had been embedded with Zhenlong Chess pieces. Cursing under his breath, Mo Ran raised his hands to form a spell sign. But he wasn't familiar with water elemental spells; halfway through, Chu Wanning, lying in his arms, reached up to still his hands. Face white, he said, "The seal is incorrect. Let me."

Mo Ran helped him sit up, supporting Chu Wanning with his own body, but caught hold of his wrists. "Stop moving. Show me how to do it."

Chu Wanning hesitated. But his own spiritual power had been damaged, and he might not be able to cast the spell properly. Lives hung in the balance; he couldn't afford to be careless. He took Mo Ran's hands and painstakingly arranged his fingers into the correct positioning, then said hoarsely, "Cast the spell."

Spiritual energy flowed from Mo Ran's fingertips. A barrier formed swiftly midair, transforming into a blue wave that enclosed the unconscious puppets.

Chu Wanning let out a small breath. He looked up, intending to praise Mo Ran, to find that handsome face, lit by the hellfire's glow, glimmering with tear tracks.

Was…was he crying?

Why was he crying?

Chu Wanning was stumped. Shi Mei wasn't present, Xue Meng was as yet unharmed, and the others around the lake were strangers to Mo Ran. Could Chu Wanning be so bold—so greedy—as to presume Mo Ran's tears were for him?

He eventually settled on saying, "Don't cry."

Mo Ran seemed to come to his senses and hastily swiped at his face.

"Aren't you too old to be acting like this?"

Mo Ran only looked at him with tear-filled eyes and asked, "Does it hurt?"

Chu Wanning was taken aback. Where pain still lingered in his

chest, a warmth suddenly bloomed, gentle as spring water. Anguish and tenderness entwined, aching and painful, bitter and sweet. For the first time in his life, Chu Wanning's personal feelings overtook him as he faced a crisis. He couldn't hold them back, no matter how inappropriate the time and place.

"It's just a minor injury. I summoned two holy weapons and put a strain on my spiritual energy; perhaps an old issue flared up." Chu Wanning raised his hand. He hovered, hesitating, then patted Mo Ran on the head. "Don't worry, it doesn't hurt anymore."

He turned again to look at the rushing, raging flames of the underworld. His eyes slowly darkened as he pushed down the pain, a steady determination emerging in its place.

"Keep an eye on Nangong Liu. Find the right opportunity…" Chu Wanning paused before continuing bluntly, "and kill him."

Chu Wanning's glare burned with hatred, yet even more than that, there was remorse. What Nangong Liu had said wasn't wrong. He had been a youth of fifteen at Jincheng Lake and hadn't yet understood the ways of the world. Nangong Liu had shown himself to be evil, but Chu Wanning had let him go. In choosing to preserve the peace of the upper cultivation realm, and to protect A-Si, who was then so young, he had concealed Nangong Liu's sacrifice of his own wife to obtain a holy weapon. In the ignorant naïveté and kindness of his youth, he had allowed these events to come to pass. He had released a tiger back into its forest, resulting in the hellfire before them now…

But he still didn't understand—what was Nangong Liu trying to do?

Chapter 164:
Shizun Kills a Disciple

AS IF IN ANSWER, out of the roiling lava stepped a giant skeletal foot with toenails wide as carriage wheels. It stepped into Ganquan Lake, half as large as the lake itself. The other foot soon followed, crushing a swath of tangerine trees on the shore.

With an earth-shaking rumble, an enormous skeleton emerged from the rift. It shook its stiff head and roared at the sky, the highest heavens trembling with the sound. Raising a sharp hatchet draped in clanging chains, it swung down toward the shore with a loud grunt. As the hatchet buried itself in the dirt, waves of heat rushed outward, liquefying the earth and turning the plants to ash.

Just as the spot where Xue Meng stood looked like it would collapse under his feet, a blue light flared to life. Nangong Liu, wielding a sword in each hand, poured all his spiritual energy into attacking the skeleton. Two streams of power collided with a *bang*, blasting soil and chunks of vegetation in all directions. Xu Shuanglin, who was sustaining the water elemental barrier, yelled to Nangong Liu, “Strike between the ribs! Do you see it?”

“I see it,” Nangong Liu said through gritted teeth. There was no trace left of his usual simpering, spineless expression as he shot toward the enormous skeleton’s ribcage. Mo Ran watched a fire ignite within that bony chest. Within the flickering flames hung the silhouette of a man. Mo Ran tried to get a closer look, but the sparks flying from the skeleton’s battle with Nangong Liu obstructed his view.

Nangong Liu had expended incredible effort to summon an exceptionally dangerous fiend from the underworld; one would assume he wanted to command it to bring about some calamity. Yet Nangong Liu's behavior seemed to indicate that he'd risked everything just to fight this skeleton with everything he had.

It was absolutely bizarre.

Xue Meng and the others still stood dazed; Mo Ran couldn't afford to stay lost in thought. Nothing good would come if the battle continued like this. Recalling how Chu Wanning's hands had formed the seal, Mo Ran mimicked him and cried, "Jiangui, Ten Thousand Coffins!"

Scores of crimson willow vines writhed up like serpents. They wound around the chess pieces on the shore and pulled them out of danger.

"Well done—you used it well."

Chu Wanning's words of affirmation made Mo Ran's chest blaze with warmth. Right now, the one he liked was by his side, and Jiangui had shielded the one he wanted to protect. Mo Ran felt calm wash over him as he studied the battle again.

Nangong Liu's attacks were shoddy, but his defensive and evasive techniques were top-notch. Perhaps Nangong Liu had always favored this style of cultivation. It made sense that when Mo Ran had massacred Rufeng Sect in his previous life, this famous sect leader had scampered away faster than a rabbit.

The giant skeleton's attacks were fearsome, but its size made it unwieldy and slow. It hadn't managed to so much as scratch Nangong Liu. Nangong Liu raced along its menacing frame, his ornate robes fluttering behind him and the red tassel on his bamboo hat flying in the wind. As he reached the skeleton's ribcage, he saw that betwixt the white bones, where the skeleton's heart should have been, hung a body.

Nangong Liu whooped like a man seeing a light at the end of the tunnel. Voice eerily distorted, he threw his head back and cackled, "Ha ha! I did it! At last… I've found you at last!" His eyes glinted beneath the bamboo hat, their whites shot through with red blood vessels. He shouted, furious or ecstatic, "I did it!"

Wreathed in the flames of the skeleton's chest was a frail man with his eyes screwed shut. His appearance was unremarkable, his face easily forgotten. Nangong Liu muttered like a madman: "I found him, I found

him… Ha ha, ha ha ha… I found you… I found you…" He raised the sword gleaming with blue light and ferociously thrust it at the unconscious man.

That deathly still man suddenly raised his head and opened his eyes.

From below, Xu Shuanglin shouted, "Don't look into his eyes! I fucking told you not to look into his eyes!"

But Nangong Liu was too close; he couldn't avoid the man's gaze. For a brief moment he stared into a pair of bestial eyes—wide and round with scarlet pupils, streaming tears of blood—and immediately his body felt like it was being torn apart. Screaming, he lost his footing and plunged to the ground far below. If not for Xu Shuanglin creating a barrier to catch him, he would have crushed every bone in his body.

Xu Shuanglin rushed over and stamped a bare foot in fury. "Why did you look? Didn't I tell you that you'd feel all the torment his souls have endured if you did that? You…"

Xu Shuanglin fell silent as Nangong Liu got shakily to his feet. He'd lost his bamboo hat in the fall, and his hair knot was in disarray. Beneath his brow, his eyes were crazed with fear.

"Ahh… *Aahhh!"*

The moonlight shone directly onto Nangong Liu's face. He reached up to cover it, fingers spasming in pain, but it was no use. Every bit of skin exposed to the moonlight began to crack and peel, revealing tender red flesh beneath. Rivulets of blood ran down his face.

Nangong Liu screamed frantically and tried to use his sleeves to shield his face but exposed his forearms in his hurry. The skin on his arms too began to split, becoming a mess of gory flesh.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning gaped as they watched from afar—what was wrong with Nangong Liu? Could it…could it be the effects of the moonlight?

Xu Shuanglin removed his outer robe, fabric flapping in the wind, and tossed it over Nangong Liu's head. He stood in the winter night clad merely in his white inner robe, seemingly unaffected by the cold. His collar had fallen slightly open, his sturdy chest rising and falling beneath. At the sight of Nangong Liu trembling on the ground, Xu Shuanglin's temper flared. He aimed a barefoot kick at Nangong Liu's head, casting off any pretense of respect. "What are you sitting there for? Get up! If you

can’t kill him even with all of this spiritual energy we’ve assembled, forget about getting better!”

Against all expectations, the cowardly, good-for-nothing Nangong Liu started crying as he sat on the frozen ground, dripping snot and tears. “It hurts so much… I’d rather die, I’d seriously rather die than live like this… There’s blood all over my face…and my hands… I can’t stand it anymore… Shuanglin, I can’t stand it anymore… Take my place…”

“Take your place, take your place—why’s it always about me taking your place?” Incensed, Xu Shuanglin kicked Nangong Liu in the face again. “Why don’t you just let me be the sect leader, then? I’ll take your place and be done with it!”

“You think I don’t want to?” Nangong Liu wailed as he toppled from the force of the kick. “You think I don’t want to? I’ve long been sick of this! The curse Luo Fenghua laid on me has ruined my life! He wants me to die in this position! So go on—there’s nothing I want more than for someone to replace me! If only I could take this damn ring off of my hand!”

“Luo Fenghua?” Mo Ran asked in a low voice. “This name sounds familiar, like I’ve heard it somewhere before.”

“He was Rufeng Sect’s leader before Nangong Liu.” Chu Wanning furrowed his brow as they eavesdropped on the conversation. “He only held the position for two years before he died of some grave illness.”

Mo Ran blinked in surprise. “Hasn’t it always been Nangong scions jockeying among themselves to head Rufeng Sect? When was there a sect leader named Luo? Shouldn’t they all be Nangongs?”

“Under normal circumstances, yes. However, Luo Fenghua staged a coup to become the Rufeng Sect leader.”

At this, Mo Ran suddenly remembered seeing the name in a book about the history of Rufeng Sect he’d read long ago, though not much had been written about him. Rufeng Sect’s family history was a tumultuous one, filled with both deep grudges and debts of gratitude. Mo Ran had found the book boring, so he’d only casually flipped through it without reading closely. His eyes widened slightly. “There was a coup in Rufeng Sect?”

“Mn. Few bring it up these days. It’s nothing to be proud of, and it also involves the current sect leader,” said Chu Wanning. “Nangong Liu walked a difficult path to become sect leader. His father suffered a qi

deviation and passed when he was little. He declared Nangong Liu his successor before he died—but Nangong Liu had a younger brother with outstanding spiritual ability who thought very highly of himself. His brother refused to accept their father's edict. On the night their father died, this brother seized the ring of Rufeng Sect's leader and usurped Nangong Liu's place."

"But if the one who seized power was his brother, shouldn't his name be Nangong, not Luo?"

"Let me finish." Chu Wanning watched as Nangong Liu staggered to his feet. Wrapped tightly in the Shuanglin Elder's robe, he rushed toward the fire in the huge skeleton's chest once again.

"Nangong Liu's brother was bloodthirsty and cruel," Chu Wanning continued. "Just three months after he seized control, he murdered two other sect leaders from the upper cultivation realm. There had been rumors for years that during one of the previous Spiritual Mountain Competitions, these two had conspired against him and not chosen the winner fairly, all because he was born of a concubine and thus was not the rightful heir to Rufeng Sect. After these killings, his behavior became more and more outrageous. He rounded up everyone who had ever criticized him, dragged them into Rufeng Sect's public square, and plucked their eyes out one by one. I didn't see it myself, but it was said they needed three carriages to cart away those hundreds of eyes."

Mo Ran shuddered inwardly but remained silent. A normal person might have sworn in anger, but what right did he have to do so? The present Chu Wanning hadn't the faintest clue what Mo Ran had done in his past lifetime. Mo Ran had slaughtered nearly everyone in Rufeng Sect's seventy-two cities on account of a personal grievance. He had used lingchi fruit to torment one of the city lords, keeping him on the brink of death for an entire year before finally allowing him to die. Mo Ran had made a point to avoid coming face-to-face with that particular city lord during this trip to Rufeng Sect. The enmity between them ran too deep. He was afraid that if he saw the man, he would do something crazy again. Even now, his nature was vicious. What right did he have to curse the bloodthirsty actions of another?

As they talked, Nangong Liu was making his way up to the enormous skeleton's heart again, speeding toward the flames with sword drawn. The closer he got, the brighter the cold light glinted from the blade in his hand.

“Luo Fenghua was the shizun of Nangong Liu’s younger brother. He couldn’t tolerate his cruelty. He and Nangong Liu planned the coup together,” Chu Wanning explained. “The two of them gathered troops and smoothly deposed the younger brother in a single night. But as Luo Fenghua held the sect leader’s ring in his hand, he was tempted by the prospect of power. He didn’t hand the ring over to Nangong Liu…”

Mo Ran stared in astonishment. “He put it on himself?”

“That’s right,” said Chu Wanning. “The tokens of every sect leader are enchanted with strong spells that will recognize their master. Rufeng Sect’s ring thus belongs to whomever wears it. Unless the sect changes hands, only death can undo this spell.”

“So…did Luo Fenghua die after two years in power because Nangong Liu retook the position of sect leader?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “Rufeng Sect’s official records state that Luo Fenghua died of an illness, and that Nangong Liu retrieved the sect leader’s ring after his death. But who can say for sure whether it’s true? Seeing as Nangong Liu has gone to all this trouble to summon and fight this monster, yelling about a curse… Whatever happened back then was probably nothing so simple.”

Mo Ran agreed, but he still had a question. “What about the younger brother? What happened to Nangong Liu’s brother after he was deposed?”

“He died,” Chu Wanning said. “The night of the coup, Luo Fenghua sought to eliminate disloyalty from his sect. He killed his disciple with his own two hands. Reportedly, he hacked him into so many pieces that the younger brother was practically mincemeat.”

Mo Ran sank into a brooding silence. He felt a little weak in the knees. If Chu Wanning found out what Mo Ran had done in his past life, would his shizun also choose a cleansing and turn him into mincemeat?

As he pondered this, he heard a loud c*runch*—Nangong Liu had stabbed the man in the skeleton with his sword. The giant skull opened its jaw and let out a mournful howl, its jagged white feet stomping pit after pit into the ground. It uprooted a copse of tangerine trees with one angry swipe of its hand, dislodging golden fruit, which it promptly trampled. As the scent of coppery blood and sweet citrus mingled on the breeze, the enormous skeleton stopped in its tracks and fell abruptly to its knees, sending lava everywhere. Its white bones disintegrated into fine powder, scattering like ash on the wind.

Nangong Liu pulled his sword from the man hanging in the skeleton and seized his body. “I found you! I’m free! The curse is lifted!” he screamed ecstatically, then cackled in triumph.

Riding his sword, Nangong Liu landed back on the ground just as the crowd of cultivators from Poetry Hall, having finally realized that something was amiss, reached the shores of Ganquan Lake.

The instant Guyueye’s sect leader, Jiang Xi, saw the surging lava, a look of astonishment overtook his handsome, imperious face. “The Infinite Hells?” He brushed his sleeves back and raised his hands. A layer of water elemental spirit dust drifted down onto the cultivators crowding behind him. Every sect had its own defense techniques; while most favored barriers, Guyueye’s spirit dust was no less effective against the roiling lava. Jiang Xi then turned, clearly irate. “Nangong Liu, what’s going on here?!”

Nangong Liu didn’t respond, merely clutching at the man he’d exhumed from the skeleton. The flames that engulfed the man’s body had been extinguished. He seemed to lack any energy or awareness, and his eyes remained closed—he lay limp in Nangong Liu’s grasp like any common corpse.

Xue Zhengyong spotted Mo Ran and Chu Wanning and rushed over. “Ran-er, Yuheng, are you all right?” he called anxiously. “Meng… Where’s Meng-er?!”

Mo Ran hastily reassured him. “Xue Meng’s fine, he’s over there—”

Xue Zhengyong looked where Mo Ran pointed and found Xue Meng ensnared by a massive vine, with only his pale face visible. Blanching, Xue Zhengyong began to stagger toward Xue Meng, but Mo Ran pulled him back. “Uncle, he’s just unconscious for now, he’ll be fine. The vine will keep him safe; you don’t need to go to him. Stay here with us.”

“What’s going on?!” Xue Zhengyong fretted. “On our way here we saw vicious ghosts descending to earth, and Nangong-zhangmen…” He looked back as he spoke and saw Nangong Liu surrounded by infernal lava, clutching that lifeless body. Xue Zhengyong fell immediately silent. He felt that something wasn’t right. Why did that body look familiar? He thought he’d seen this man’s face before, long ago…

It was an ordinary face, one easily lost to the passage of time. Even after racking his brain, Xue Zhengyong couldn’t place him. But he felt that something was wrong—everything about this was wrong somehow.

Nangong Liu suddenly lifted his face. His features were drowned in blood, his mouth split in a horrible grin. Nangong Liu bellowed a laugh, a strange light flashing in his eyes. He looked nothing like his usual fawning, simpering self.

Among the crowd that had rushed over were Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si. “Father…” Nangong Si said hoarsely.

Ye Wangxi caught sight of Xu Shuanglin standing to the side. “Yifu?!” she gasped.

Glancing at Ye Wangxi, Xu Shuanglin shook his head in a clear message—*stay back.* Surrounded by flaming lava, his lapels were slightly askew, and his loose white robes fluttered in the wind. With a lazy smile playing at the corners of his lips, he raised his chin slightly to survey the chaos and hellfire raging before him. The rounded toes of his bare feet twitched, sending up glimmering sparks. Then he lowered his head as if waiting, the reflection of fire in his eyes like red-gold carp swimming out of the shadowy night.

A woman in the crowd screamed in fright.

Xu Shuanglin smirked without looking up. Of course he knew what had happened—he could already hear the sounds of chewing. Behind him, Nangong Liu had grabbed the limp man’s shoulders. There under the cold moonlight, he tore into the man’s neck with his teeth and greedily drank his blood.

Silence reigned in the wake of that shrill cry. The watchers stood frozen in shock, unable to comprehend what they witnessed. Rufeng’s Nangong Liu, leader of the world’s foremost cultivation sect, was devouring a corpse so wretchedly, so hideously. How…was this possible…

“Father!” Nangong Si was first to break. He made a mad dash toward Nangong Liu. Ye Wangxi, unable to restrain him, followed close behind.

“Father, what are you doing?” cried Nangong Si. “Why are you doing this?”

“Sect Leader—”

Nangong Liu gnawed upon the dead man with relish, as if he hadn’t heard a thing. The robe covering his face had long since fallen away, leaving his cracked skin to rip painfully open again and again beneath the

moonlight. The more pain he felt, the more madly he chewed—as if it were sweet spring water or a bitter panacea, the salvation for which he had longed.

Some of the watching cultivators couldn't bear it anymore. The sounds of retching rose from the crowd. "How did this happen…" someone murmured weakly.

"Mad… He's gone mad…"

"That's so gross…"

The moonlight cascaded over Nangong Liu's body. A shudder ran through him as he pulled back from the corpse, blood and saliva dripping steadily from the corners of his lips. Then he jerked his head up, opened his gory mouth, and let out two tremulous screams of anguish.

After eating the corpse's flesh, Nangong Liu's face hadn't healed at all. His skin was still splitting under the moonlight, one shred after another. His features were awash in red; only his eyes remained white. He flung the corpse to the ground and stomped on it. Then he turned and grabbed Xu Shuanglin by the collar, roaring like a beast, "What's wrong? Why didn't it work… It didn't work!"

His hands shook uncontrollably, veins protruding across their backs. His eyes were thoroughly bloodshot, leaking fat tears of agony. "It hurts… It hurts so much… I'd rather be dead… I'd rather be *dead*!" he howled desperately.

Then, as if in realization, he let go of Xu Shuanglin. He lowered his head and fumbled at the corpse, reaching for its heart. "His spiritual core! I need more power… I must eat his spiritual core! His spiritual core… Spiritual core, spiritual core…" Manic, he plunged his hand into the hole his sword had opened in the man's chest and groped frantically, hands slicked with blood.

Without warning, a sharp claw stabbed Nangong Liu from behind, piercing him right through the chest. Blood spurted like a fountain.

Nangong Liu gaped soundlessly, as if he hadn't yet realized what had happened, hadn't felt any pain. He blankly turned his head. His bloodshot eyes opened wide as he saw Xu Shuanglin looking up, a small smile on his unmarred, relaxed face. "Why are you eating that? Anything you eat will be wasted on someone like you."

Chapter 165:
Shizun, It's Him!

THE CLAW, suffused with spiritual energy, retracted swiftly. Blood rushed out in its wake.

Nangong Liu's lips opened and closed, but no words came. It seemed he had never expected Xu Shuanglin to turn on him. At length, he spat out a mouthful of blood and keeled over.

"*Dad!"* Nangong Si's shriek tore through the sky.

"Sect Leader!"

The crowd gasped in fright.

Xu Shuanglin carelessly knelt and produced a small fruit from his qiankun pouch. He stuffed it in Nangong Liu's mouth and forced him to swallow.

Mo Ran's eyes were sharp; his expression shifted instantly. "Lingchi fruit?!"

The fruit Xu Shuanglin had fed to Nangong Liu was the same kind that had suspended the feathered tribe between life and death at Peach Blossom Springs—the lingchi fruit, which made those who consumed it wish to die, yet forced them to live. Nangong Liu instantly sank into unbearable agony. He curled on the ground like a shrimp, shivering violently. Xu Shuanglin looked at him, the flames that danced in his eyes filling them with warmth.

"Sect Leader, I pity you. You've made it this far in life, but in the end, you're nothing but a spineless piece of shit."

"Yifu?!" Ye Wangxi exclaimed, her voice quavering.

"Father… Let go of my father! Let go of him!" Blood was still thicker than water. As despicable as Nangong Liu might be, Nangong Si couldn't bear to see him so wretched. Shaking in fury, he started toward Xu Shuanglin.

With a wave of his hand, Xu Shuanglin erected a defensive barrier to hold him off. The glance he shot Nangong Si was frigid as he said, "Your elders are speaking. Don't interrupt. Kneel!" He raised a finger.

Nangong Si felt like a thousand catties had descended upon him; it

was impossible to remain on his feet. After a moment of teeth-gritted resistance, he landed heavily on his knees.

"A-Si." Ye Wangxi stepped in front of Nangong Si without hesitation. She couldn't raise a sword to Xu Shuanglin, but neither could she stand by and simply watch. "Yifu, don't hurt him…" she pleaded, her expression one of anguish and bewilderment.

"Why would I want to hurt him? As if he's worthy of that." Xu Shuanglin turned his attention back to Nangong Liu, then raised a foot and kicked his mangled face. "It's been so long. Now that I'm facing the biggest despot in the world, I can't help but want to spend some time reminiscing."

Nangong Liu coughed up a great mouthful of blood. "Reminiscing? What do you mean, *reminiscing*?! Didn't you say as long as I summoned Luo Fenghua's soul from the Infinite Hells, I could lift the curse he left on me? That I would get better and no longer fear…no longer fear the night. You lied to me… You actually…*lied* to me…"

The younger cultivators in the crowd didn't know what to make of these words, but those of Xue Zhengyong's generation looked stricken. Xue Zhengyong glanced over at the youthful corpse.

"Luo Fenghua?"

"It's Luo Fenghua!"

The corpse on the ground was indeed that former teacher of the Nangong brothers, the short-lived sect usurper, Rufeng Sect's only ruler of a different surname—Luo Fenghua.

"Such a wonderful imagination you've got," said Xu Shuanglin with a grin. "Lift the curse? Back then you killed him with your own hands, and right now you've drunk his blood and eaten his flesh. After acting so barbarically, you *still* think you can lift the curse? How naïve."

"Why shouldn't I drink his blood or eat his flesh?! Yes, I might have sent him to an early death so I could seize power, but *he's* the one who left a curse on the sect leader's ring before he died. Since the day I put it on, I haven't had a single normal…a single…" Nangong Liu sputtered out between coughs. "A single normal night…in the past ten years! Why shouldn't I…why shouldn't I have…"

"You should have," Xu Shuanglin agreed, his face expressionless. "You really should have." His mouth twisted into another smile. He knelt

and lifted Nangong Liu's face. "You did *so* well. No one could have done better than you. No one is more outstanding, more obedient… No one is more stupid than you, Sect Leader." He snorted derisively. "Piece of shit."

Xu Shuanglin rose unhurriedly to his feet. Somehow, he still wore a measured and calm smile. Throwing his arms wide, he announced warmly, "Esteemed guests, dinner is over. I've prepared dessert—I hope you've all enjoyed it."

"Xu Shuanglin!" someone shouted angrily. "What are you trying to do?!"

"Nothing much—I just want to share a few interesting tidbits with all of you. Rufeng Sect has looked down on the cultivation world for hundreds of years, plagued by too many scandals to name. Among these, there's one in particular I've waited more than a decade to reveal. The day has finally come for the world to know the truth." His piercing voice softened. "This may be Rufeng Sect's very last secret," he said lightly.

At these words, Nangong Liu's heart seized with intense dread. He shuddered violently, his lips trembling so badly that he struggled to speak as he stared wide-eyed at the man standing atop the lava. "Who… Who *are* you?!"

Xu Shuanglin cocked his head, a hint of a smile curving his mouth, but didn't reply. His hand glowed as a dagger materialized in his grasp. With a decisive swipe, he sliced his palm open and dipped a finger into the streaming blood to draw an array on his arm. Blowing softly on the wet lines of the spell, he intoned, "A boat in the western window shall ferry you into the dream." He turned and grinned. "Sect Leader, who I am will be clear as day after you watch."

Mo Ran moved to stop Xu Shuanglin but felt Chu Wanning tug him back. "Shizun?"

"It's not an evil spell, it's only an illusion like the one at Peach Blossom Springs. It'll show everyone his memories," said Chu Wanning. "Let's see what he has to say."

Xu Shuanglin's array glowed brilliantly, peeling away from his arm and riding the wind, expanding as it rose. In no time it had enveloped the entire frozen lake. Broken fragments of memories drifted down like grains of sand, quickly blanketing the lake's surface in Xu Shuanglin's memories. Imbued with the spell's energy, they tumbled about, transforming the scenery like a dusting of fresh snow.

Although no one moved from their positions around the frozen lake, the trees and lava faded from view. Gradually, Rufeng Sect's Flying Jade Platform materialized before them.

The platform within the illusion was deserted save for two, one standing and one sitting. The one who stood was barefoot and dressed carelessly, hairpiece crooked in his unkempt hair—Xu Shuanglin. The one who sat wore embroidered robes of crimson, his features flabby and pallid—this, of course, was Nangong Liu.

Nangong Liu caressed the ring on his thumb: the sect leader's ring, inlaid with precious green jade. His face flickered with excitement and anxiety. "Have all five holy weapons been prepared?"

"This is the ninth time you've asked," Xu Shuanglin drawled. "Ask one more time and I'll quit."

Aggrieved, Nangong Liu jiggled his leg. "Okay, okay, so we'll wait until all the guests have arrived for Si-er's wedding." He paused briefly. "Show me the list of sacrifices again so I can see who's still missing."

Xu Shuanglin tossed a booklet at him. Nangong Liu began noisily flipping through. His gaze was feverish; he had the look of someone mad with thirst finally seeing a cup of life-saving water. He counted the names once, then again to be sure. His fingertips stabbed at the pages like he wanted to punch through them.

"They'll all be here," Xu Shuanglin said as he watched Nangong Liu mumbling frantically. "A couple dozen people with pure elemental spiritual energies, plus the guards you've assembled over the years that have the five elemental energies as well. It won't be as strong as using the soul of an elemental spiritual essence, but the combination of these people in addition to the holy weapons will be enough. Opening the main gate of the Infinite Hells should be a cinch."

Nangong Liu gripped the booklet and nodded repeatedly. "Okay."

"This is the last good chance you'll have, though. If you mess it up, it'll be even harder to lift the curse."

"Then I definitely can't mess it up!"

"You should say you definitely *won't* mess it up," Xu Shuanglin replied lazily.

"Okay okay, I definitely won't mess it up, I definitely won't mess it up." Nangong Liu paused. "Shuanglin, I'm still worried. Can we go over

the plan once more?"

After a pause, Xu Shuanglin said, "Dage, we've been over it twenty times."

Undeterred, Nangong Liu asked, "What's a few more? Better safe than sorry."

"Fine, whatever you say," Xu Shuanglin muttered, exasperated.

Nangong Liu rattled off the plan: "At dusk on the day before Si-er's wedding, all the guests will assemble at Poetry Hall. I'll draw the straws and select the twenty-one sticks we marked." He looked up at Xu Shuanglin. "Then it'll be your turn."

Left with no choice, Xu Shuanglin reluctantly recited: "Mn. I'll excuse myself and accompany them as they leave the hall." He continued, "After entering the forest, I'll lure the offerings to the shore of Ganquan Lake and plant the Zhenlong Chess pieces in them so they're nice and obedient. I'll offer their spiritual energy to the holy weapons. When they're all under my control, I'll shoot the signal fireworks into the sky and open the rift to the Infinite Hells."

"Good, good!" In contrast to Xu Shuanglin's indifference, Nangong Liu seemed excited, almost frantic, as he continued reviewing the plan. "After the fireworks go off, I'll command the five guard divisions. Under guise of fixing the rift, I'll lead them to the hunting grounds and join you. Then we'll turn the guards into Zhenlong Chess pieces and sacrifice them too!"

Xu Shuanglin nodded. "Everything should go smoothly," he concluded.

"Everything *must* go smoothly." Nangong Liu squeezed the ring on his hand, his complexion tinged green. "I've had enough, I've had enough…" He mumbled for a while, then suddenly looked up. "Shuanglin, are you sure we really don't have to use the soul of an elemental spiritual essence? What if the power of the holy weapons isn't pure enough…"

"Don't worry. Those five weapons are the best of the best—their power can move mountains. Once they absorb the spiritual energy from the offerings, there's no doubt they'll get the job done."

"But what if—what if we can't open the main gate to the Infinite Hells? What if it's like Butterfly Town, and someone stops us… That Chu Wanning!" Nangong Liu spat. "Curse that Yuheng of the Night Sky,

Beidou Immortal—always sticking his nose in other people's business! We got lucky at Butterfly Town and killed him by a fluke. A huge stroke of luck, but who would've thought that old bald donkey Huaizui could bring him back to life. Despicable!"

As he listened, Mo Ran's heart roiled with fury. During the calamity at Butterfly Town, Rufeng Sect had dispatched many of their own cultivators to quell the chaos. More than a hundred Rufeng Sect disciples had died in that battle. These two men knew this as well…

But which was the fake Gouchen? Was it Nangong Liu, or Xu Shuanglin?

"Chu Wanning's life should not be cut short," said Xu Shuanglin in the illusion. "He's a man of extraordinary ability. It would be a pity if he died so pointlessly."

"So what if he's extraordinary? I can't stand that obnoxious face of his!"

"Well, now that you mention it—esteemed Sect Leader, didn't you see Chu Wanning recently? How is he now that he's been reborn? Were his spiritual powers damaged?"

"No idea about his spiritual powers, but his temper hasn't improved a bit," Nangong Liu retorted. "All high and mighty, thinks his shit doesn't stink. To him, I'm like a fucking dog who rolled in mud!"

Xu Shuanglin grinned. "This comparison of Sect Leader's is quite interesting."

"Just speaking of him makes me so *mad*! I'm the chief of the world's top sect! Nodding and bowing to Chu Wanning I could live with, but I had to listen to his disciple mouth off to me as well. That disciple of his, Mo-zongshi, is a real piece of work. Insolent, and a personality even worse than his master's." He sighed, eyes flashing with malice. "And a wood spiritual essence to boot… Really I wish we could forget these holy weapons and stick to the original plan—turn his body into a pillar of spiritual energy and use *him* as an offering to open the gate to the Infinite Hells!"

"We've failed twice already, first at Jincheng Lake and then at Peach Blossom Springs," Xu Shuanglin said. "Then he went off on his own for five years and it was hard to track him. The one time we managed to lure him in, we got the Yellow River Mackerel Demon to take a piece out of him. But he's blessed with some stellar luck—who would have thought

Jiang Xi would pass by in time to save him? Now Mo Ran's grown into his prime—he's not some stripling kid. We can't touch him. Using an elemental spiritual essence is a dead end."

"You just wait!" Nangong Liu fumed. "Once I throw off this curse, I'll be much stronger. Then whether it's Chu-zongshi or Mo-zongshi, they'll all have to kneel and do as I say!"

Xu Shuanglin only smiled without responding.

Nangong Liu stewed in his frustration for a while before gradually calming himself. He sighed. Then, staring at the ring on his hand, he suddenly spoke up again. "Shuanglin, when you gave up looking for spiritual essences five years ago, it wasn't just because Mo Ran came down from the mountains to travel and you lost track of him, right?"

Once again, Xu Shuanglin said nothing.

Nangong Liu slowly lifted his gaze. "Wasn't it also because you discovered that the earth elemental spiritual essence was Ye Wangxi? You couldn't bear to give up your foster daughter. The girl's the only family you have left in the world…"

"I have no family." Xu Shuanglin cut him off, expressionless. "Besides, Sect Leader, you know full well that the fire spiritual essence is your own son. Even if I could give up Ye Wangxi, could the sect leader sacrifice Si-er?"

"Forget it." Nangong Liu waved his hand fretfully. "Since holy weapons can do the job, why harp on it? Let's stop talking about this."

"And what if holy weapons couldn't do the job?"

Nangong Liu froze. "What do you mean? Didn't you just say there would be no problems?"

"Don't worry, Sect Leader. I'm just curious, is all. If opening the gate to the Infinite Hells required the souls of five living people, required the sacrifice of Si-er, what would Sect Leader choose? To endure the pain of the curse as long as you live, or…?" Xu Shuanglin left the rest unsaid, lips twitching with ridicule.

In the illusion, Nangong Liu's silence was so long that those watching thought the memory would end before he answered. At last, Nangong Liu replied softly, "Sacrifices must be made."

Everyone's jaws dropped.

Xue Zhengyong, who cherished his son above life itself, found Nangong Liu's choice inexplicable. "Absurd…" he growled, enraged. "He's willing to give up his son to save his own skin? Completely absurd!"

Nangong Si stood, stiff as a board, his expression vaguely bewildered, his eyes vacant.

The scene faded to black. The glittering shards of memory tinkled as they swirled, melodious as windchimes.

Another illusion lit the sky. Before their eyes, mighty clouds encircled a great snow-capped mountain, its peak dazzling in the sunlight. "It's Jincheng Lake!" someone exclaimed.

Chapter 166:
Shizun's Esteemed Madam Rong

THE INSCRIPTION on the stone beside Jincheng Lake read "The Path Forward Is Difficult" in stark, scarlet script.

As before, Nangong Liu and Xu Shuanglin were the only living people on the scene. Now, however, the ground was littered with the bodies of countless dead. More specifically, countless dead *merfolk.*

"Hurry and seal the path; we don't want other cultivators coming up the mountain. They'll have questions."

"I'm almost done." Xu Shuanglin pushed a black chess piece between the lips of a limp merman and mouthed the words of a spell. The merman rose unsteadily from the ground, bowed respectfully, then leapt back into the ice-studded Jincheng Lake with a splash.

"I'm not yet proficient with this forbidden technique," said Xu Shuanglin. "Once I get the hang of it, I won't have to feed them chess pieces individually. I'll be able to point at them from afar and they'll do whatever I say."

"It's that powerful?"

"Why would it be forbidden otherwise? In fact, even that kind of control is only scratching the surface. I've seen someone…" Xu Shuanglin paused and chuckled. "I mean, I've read about someone who could control people while preserving their awareness, making them obey his orders of their own volition. Now *that's* true power. As it stands, I can control their bodies but not their minds. I've got a long way to go."

Nangong Liu nodded. "You shouldn't practice too much with it anyway. Better not to attract attention."

"As you say, Sect Leader."

"Thank heavens you thought of this technique, though. If I'm to lift the curse, I'll need to open the gate to the Infinite Hells, and to do that, I'll require all five elemental spiritual essences: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Finding the spiritual essences is the hard part—we can't just show up at every sect and examine people one by one. But with Jincheng Lake under your control, every cultivator who comes here looking for weapons will reveal their spiritual cores to you. We can sit back and wait for them

to come to us."

Nangong Liu retrieved a tangerine from the saddlebag of the horse next to him. He peeled it and began to eat, heaving a sigh of admiration. "Shuanglin, all those mythical beings in Jincheng Lake didn't stand a chance against you. You're brilliant."

"Jincheng Lake is a relic of the past," Xu Shuanglin replied with a small smile. "After millions of years, the power of Gouchen the Exalted has dissipated to almost nothing. That's the only reason someone like me can manage all this. Sect Leader's praise is undeserved."

Nangong Liu laughed out loud. "Go on, tell me. What do you want as a reward?"

"There isn't really anything I want."

"Nah, that won't do—you have to name something."

"Then how about Sect Leader gives me half a tangerine?"

Laughing again, Nangong Liu blinked. "That's it?" But he peeled another tangerine and held it out to Xu Shuanglin. "Have the whole thing."

"Just half is enough." Xu Shuanglin smiled blandly. "I don't want much."

"You know, you're a pretty strange guy. But sure, if you say so—here's half."

Nangong Liu offered him a portion of the tangerine. Xu Shuanglin's fingers were inconveniently stained with blood, so he took the tangerine from Nangong Liu's fingertips with his teeth and chewed. "Sweet and juicy—delicious," he grinned.

In that moment, Xu Shuanglin's smile beneath the sunlight held a sinister shadow. The juice of the tangerine trickled from his lips, pooling at the corners of his mouth. He licked it away, his tongue flicking out like a viper mid-hiss. Nangong Liu jerked his hand back on instinct, as though spooked. But the expression on his face was one of puzzled annoyance, as if he himself had no idea what had scared him.

"Look at that," Xu Shuanglin said abruptly.

"What?" Nangong Liu tore his gaze away from Xu Shuanglin's face to look. His eyes flew wide. A complicated expression surfaced on his pudgy features. "It's…that *creature*…"

"The merlion piranha." Xu Shuanglin hauled the dead thing over,

tossing the corpse upon the rocky shore to examine it carefully. The monster had the body of a fish and the head of a lion, its bloody fangs bared in a pained grimace and its lifeless, dull-black eyes bulging in distress.

Xu Shuanglin dipped his finger into the blood on the piranha's body. He gave it a whiff, and his bare toes curled subconsciously as he frowned. "Ugh. That's vile."

He straightened and kicked the piranha away. "This should be quite an uncommon creature in Jincheng Lake. It's said that Gouchen left behind only auspicious creatures like dragons to guard the weapons in the lake, but the passage of time has wrought many changes upon them. Even devils can ascend and gods can fall, to say nothing of this humble creature."

Nangong Liu muttered, "Back then, this was the one that made me offer up Rong Yan's heart…"

At this, the crowd outside the illusion stood stunned. Other than Chu Wanning, who already knew the truth, all were shaken by this revelation.

"What?!"

"Rong Yan… But that's…that's…"

While some sputtered, others had already craned their necks to look at Nangong Si in surprise and pity. "That's his…"

After Nangong Si's initial astonishment, he began trembling from head to toe. Staggering backward, he crumpled to his knees. His face was ashen, his expression ghastly to behold. "Mom? No way… No way!"

"A-Si…" Ye Wangxi tearfully murmured.

"No *way*!" Nangong Si's eyes were wild. His handsome face twisted with fear and wrath, sorrow and shock, his features warping almost beyond recognition. He couldn't understand what anyone was saying; he couldn't hear anything at all. "That's impossible! My mom died fighting evil spirits! Father told me, she was fighting evil spirits when they pierced her heart and killed her!" He shuddered all over and mumbled, "Her heart was destroyed… They stabbed her in the heart, and she died…"

He didn't cry, but his eyes were round as saucers, bulging from their sockets. He hoarsely repeated those words over and over, first mumbling and muttering, then spitting and shouting, before breaking into feral howls: "They stabbed her! They stabbed her in the heart!"

A memory flashed before his eyes.

Nangong Si had been very young when his mother and father had set out with a group of Rufeng cultivators to seek weapons from Jincheng Lake. His memory of the evening before they left was distinct: he'd played with Naobaijin in the forest behind the mountain until it was late. It was long after nightfall when he crept back to his room to pretend he'd been studying the whole time. Little did he know that his mother had stopped by after dinner to give him a cloth quiver she had embroidered. Discovering the young master's residence empty, she realized Nangong Si had snuck out to play.

Rong Yan had a naturally cold disposition. She never doted on Nangong Si like other mothers. When she returned to his quarters that night, Nangong Si was holding up a volume of *Carefree Wandering*, making a great show of reading it aloud. Rong Yan stopped him and asked, "What did you do after dinner?"

Unaware that Rong Yan already knew he'd been slacking, Nangong Si set down the scroll, scratched his head, and said brightly, "Mother, I—I've been memorizing this book."

"All this time?"

The young Nangong Si was afraid of being punished. He stalled for a moment before nodding, "Uh…uh-huh!"

Rong Yan straightened her slender neck and set her jaw. When she looked at Nangong Si, her gaze was sharp and cold. "You're lying."

Nangong Si jumped. "Am not," he replied, blushing furiously.

Rong Yan didn't waste words on the child. She rolled up the bamboo scroll and asked, "What comes before 'If the whole world blamed him, he despaired not'?"

"'If the whole world…world…'"

"'If the whole world praised him, he rejoiced not!'" Rong Yan's elegant brows lowered in a scowl. She slapped the scroll onto the table with a *crack*. "Nangong Si, what have I always taught you?" she said sternly. "It's one thing to run around outside after dark, but now you've learned to tell lies?"

"Mom…"

"Silence!"

In the face of her anger, Nangong Si panicked. Although his father was easy-going and affable, between his parents, he'd always had more

respect for his haughty and severe mother.

"Your behavior is unacceptable."

The rims of Nangong Si's eyes reddened against his will. Terrified of an even harsher scolding, he retorted, still clinging to hope, "I—I didn't get back that late. I just played outside for a little after dinner."

Rong Yan glared at him. She hadn't been all that angry to begin with, but watching her son rack his brain for excuses deepened her irritation into fury and disappointment.

"As soon as it got dark, I came—"

A sharp slap across the face cut Nangong Si off mid-sentence. Chest heaving, Rong Yan's hand hung in the air as she cried furiously, "Nangong Si! 'As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, *deception*, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest.' Have you forgotten this entirely? Are you going to stand here and lie to your mother?"

Dazed from the slap, Nangong Si took a long moment to come back to his senses. His eyes pricked with tears of indignation as he wailed, "Wh-why would I lie if you weren't so *mean*? You're always hitting me and yelling at me… You're horrible! I don't like you! I only like Daddy!" He jumped to his feet, ready to run off to find Nangong Liu.

"Don't even think about it!" Rong Yan yanked him back with an ugly expression. She tapped Nangong Si on the nose with a nail painted scarlet with cardamom, anger surging in her eyes. "What's your dad going to do? He nods yes to everything all day long, worthless bootlicker that he is. Do you really want to be like him? Sit down!"

"I won't! I won't!"

Rong Yan gritted her teeth and dragged the struggling child back onto his chair. But as soon as she let go, Nangong Si tried to make another escape. At last, Rong Yan had no choice but to raise her hand and bring down a restraining barrier with a *crash*. The barrier held the child firmly in place. Nangong Si fell to his knees, humiliated and furious, panting like a caged beast.

"Lemme go! I don't want a mother like you! You… You never say a kind word to me! You don't care about me, you just yell at me… All you ever do is yell at me!"

Rong Yan's face turned red and then white. After a long pause, she

said through trembling lips, “Stay in your room and behave. Memorize *Carefree Wandering* from beginning to end—I will test you tomorrow. Keep making trouble, and I’ll…” She found herself at a loss. What would she do? She really didn’t know. She’d always been a spirited and iron-willed woman; she thought nothing of reprimanding her craven husband in public to put him in his place.

But when it came to Nangong Si…what would she do?

She stood for a while, bitter and resentful, sorrowful and exasperated. As rage curdled her heart, she began to cough violently. It was an old illness that had plagued her for many years; after a spate of coughing, she hacked out a mouthful of dark blood. Feigning nonchalance, she wiped her mouth clean with a handkerchief before Nangong Si noticed.

“Si-er, you are young,” she said, her voice hoarse and somber. “You haven’t learned to see what’s good or bad, what’s right or wrong, with your own eyes. Sometimes, those who indulge you don’t have your best interests at heart, and those who are strict with you may not wish you ill. Your father is weak and incompetent, he…” She paused. “I don’t want you to become a cultivator or sect leader like him,” she finished.

Nangong Si bit his lip in silence.

“Yes, you’re a troublemaker and you don’t apply yourself to your studies—these are small things. But where did you learn to lie? Our Rufeng Sect is built upon centuries of storied tradition. Only by maintaining the values of gentlemen can we stand at the forefront of the cultivation world. Your father has never earnestly taught you these principles, but as your mother, I will remind you of them every time. Even if you don’t listen, even if you think I’m harsh, even if you hate me for it.”

“If Daddy doesn’t teach me, that’s because he sees me as Si-er. He’s happy when I’m happy, unlike you!” Nangong Si snapped. “What kind of mother are you?! You only see me as Rufeng Sect’s young master and the future sect leader! I never have any fun with you! I’m not gonna listen to you!”

Rong Yan was furious. Her cheeks, usually white as snow, were unnaturally flushed. She covered her mouth with the handkerchief as she was overcome by another coughing fit. This time, it took her longer to catch her breath. At last she said sternly, “Fine. If you won’t listen, I’ll tell you every single day until you understand.”

Nangong Si, surpassingly stubborn even as a child, had clapped his hands over his ears.

Rong Yan sat down and gradually smoothed her emotions, but her chest still twinged with pain. This old heart injury was one she had sustained while exorcising demons. She took medicine for it every day, but it only worsened with time. When she looked up and saw her son's rebellious expression in the candlelight, she had to again close her eyes.

Finally, she said in a more measured tone, "Si-er, I won't be by your side forever. There will come a day when I can't watch over you. I only hope that in the future, you'll understand…" She trailed off. Within her barrier, Nangong Si was curled into a tiny ball, crying. Her child, her carefree and bright Si-er, had begun to sob under the force of her scolding.

For a long while, Rong Yan could only stare. Slowly, she rose and walked over to the barrier. She reached out, wanting to undo the spell, to lean down and take this child in her arms, to touch his reddened face, to press a kiss to his forehead.

But she restrained herself, her figure stiff and unrelenting. With effort, she finished the sentence she had started: "You need to understand… 'As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest.'"

"I don't get it, I don't want to, I… I…" Lifting tearful eyes, Nangong Si railed at his mother who stood outside the barrier. "I hate you! I don't want a mom like you!"

Rong Yan was silent. In that moment, her face, visible through the barrier, was pale and resolute as ever, yet seemed to contain a measure of grief and heartbreak.

For twenty years, Nangong Si had seen that face in his dreams. Each time, his pillow was wet when he awoke. His younger self was like a scorpion brandishing its pincers, injecting venom straight into his mother's heart.

It hurt. It hurt so much. It was a pain that would persist for a lifetime; he would never forgive himself.

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Three days later, Rong Yan still hadn't come to the residence to see Nangong Si. Instead, she asked her maid to deliver the quiver embroidered with camellia flowers, along with a letter. Even her writing was formal and solemn, unadorned with niceties. She said that she knew Si-er had recently been learning martial arts and taken a liking to archery, so she'd embroidered a quiver for his use. She would be traveling to Jincheng Lake with his father. Upon her return, she still intended to review *Carefree Wandering* with him, and she hoped he wouldn't continue to stubbornly shirk his studies.

And what had Nangong Si done? Angry and resentful, he had taken a knife and cut his mother's quiver into countless scraps. He had tossed his mother's letter into the fire and burned it to ash. He had ripped up the copy of *Carefree Wandering* on his table.

As a young child, he had delighted in these daring acts of destruction. He lashed out at her. He hated her. He wanted her to know that he'd never, ever listen to such a terrible mother. He would never bend to her will, he…

He'd bared his venomous fangs and erected his walls. He waited for his mother to humble herself before him, to admit her mistakes. Or… perhaps, back then, he'd summoned this pathetic burst of malevolence as a tool to trade for a single gentle word, a single warm embrace from his mother.

So he waited.

But he never received any of those things. An admission of wrongdoing or a hug, some show of remorse or gentleness—he would've accepted anything. He had stood his ground, quite self-satisfied, waiting to fight another round with that woman—only to receive, instead, her cold corpse.

"Rufeng Sect's leader was ambushed in the forest late at night. His wife shielded him from the attack. She was stabbed in the heart and passed away."

When the coffin arrived, Nangong Si stood dazed at the foot of Rufeng Sect's towering city gate. The ground was littered in white silk and paper money. As the heir to the sect, his place was at the front of the procession. According to funeral customs, after an elder shattered an earthenware pot, the madam's coffin would be carried over a fire pit and re-enter the sect. Her son was to kneel and cry, knocking his head against

the ground, to welcome back his mother's soul.

But Nangong Si couldn't cry. He felt the whole thing was absurd, empty and unreal. The brilliant sunlight dazzled his eyes as it glanced off the ground. He felt dizzy and nauseated.

It wasn't real.

It wasn't real!

If it were real, what should he do? How could he possibly accept it? Before death had separated them, the last reminder his mother had given him was this: *As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn't indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest.*

And how had he answered her? He didn't want to remember, but his hateful cries from that day had been carved into his bones. His mother's face outside the barrier had been so pained, so sorrowful.

It hurt…

It really hurt too much. The last words he had said to his mother in this lifetime were…

I hate you.

I don't want a mom like you.

The coffin was hoisted over the fire. The elder smashed the earthenware pot, thousands knelt and wept, and his father choked with sobs at the side of the casket. But Nangong Si stood alone, clutching that camellia quiver he had cut to pieces. Its embroidered petals were a vivid red, the stamens canary yellow. The flowers it depicted were dusted with snow yet flourished nonetheless, as though his mother's warm fingertips had but touched the coarse fabric and awoken these brilliant blooms. Perhaps she'd had some premonition before her death, or perhaps it was only happenstance—her embroidery was so detailed, the flowers so lifelike, that it seemed she had taken all the love she hadn't spoken aloud, all her future lessons and advice, and stitched them, thread by thread, onto that little cloth quiver.

Nangong Si clutched the quiver tightly. It was the very last thing his mother had left for him.

Chapter 167:
Shizun, I Don't Want Anyone to Scold You Ever Again

BUT THE ILLUSION PAID no heed to Nangong Si's anguish. It pressed on mercilessly, laying open one grisly truth from the past after another.

On the shore of Jincheng Lake, Nangong Liu crushed the face of the merlion piranha beneath his heel. Scrutinizing it carefully, he pronounced, "Bastard."

"This bastard wanted Madam's spiritual core. Sect Leader could've refused," said Xu Shuanglin. "But Sect Leader still sold his wife off for a holy weapon."

"Don't say it like that; I didn't *sell her off*. Rong-shijie was in poor health to begin with. Rainbell Isle's best doctors examined her; even they said she didn't have long. I would never have sacrificed her to this monster had she been in good health."

Xu Shuanglin raised his eyebrows a fraction but said no more.

Nangong Liu stared at the merlion piranha a while longer. His temper suddenly flared. "Life is so unfair," he grumbled.

A look of surprise crept over Xu Shuanglin's face, as if he hadn't expected someone blessed with both fame and fortune to have complaints about their fate. He let out a snort of laughter. "What?"

"I said, life is unfair."

Xu Shuanglin didn't respond.

"When others get holy weapons," Nangong Liu continued, "the lake creatures ask for a flowering branch or a song. Why is it that *I* summoned a monster that wanted my wife dead? What could I have done? What choice did I have?" He looked deeply resentful. "You saw it yourself back then. Our retinue held their tongues, but the zongshi rebuked me. That Chu Wanning… A fucking fifteen-year-old kid, yet he dared disrespect me like that, giving me an earful about morals and integrity… Empty words! If *he* had to choose between a dying wife and an unsurpassed holy weapon, I refuse to believe he would choose the former!"

Xu Shuanglin only grinned. "Hard to say. Don't look at me like that —seriously, you never can tell what those kinds of people really think."

“What else could they think? They only care for burnishing their own reputations. As if I don’t know what these people are like!” Nangong Liu grew increasingly sullen. Cursing, he kicked the piranha again. “Ever since I became sect leader, I’ve suffered one indignity after another. On top of that damned curse, I have to paste a smile on my face all day long… It’s a good thing I learned to swallow my humiliation. Otherwise, I would’ve likely died at the hands of Chu Wanning the day I obtained my sword.”

“You’re quite correct.” Xu Shuanglin was still all smiles. “Back then I also thought Chu Wanning was going to kill you. Yet you somehow persuaded him not only to spare you from Tianwen’s killing blow, but also to keep his mouth shut about Jincheng Lake. Esteemed Sect Leader, your talent for saving your own skin is second to none.”

“Even if he was outraged, he knew he couldn’t afford to throw Rufeng Sect into chaos,” said Nangong Liu. “And there was Si-er to think of as well—we told him his mother died from her injuries while exorcising demons. It’s surely less upsetting than the truth.”

Heaving a sigh, Xu Shuanglin nodded agreeably. “No wonder the zongshi left. If I were him, I’d be thoroughly disgusted with you as well.”

“You think I wanted to do it? That I had a choice?” Nangong Liu snapped. “I already said it—life is unfair.”

At this point, one of the people watching stole a glance at Chu Wanning and muttered, “So Chu-zongshi knew the truth about Madam Rong all along?”

“Not only knew—he helped Nangong Liu cover the whole thing up and didn’t tell anyone what really happened.”

“I guess he didn’t want any trouble—he was only fifteen. If he really offended Rufeng Sect, there’d be consequences.”

Another softly spoke up in Chu Wanning’s defense. “I don’t think so—he lost a lot to gain a little. Didn’t Nangong Liu say Chu-zongshi concealed the truth because he wanted to protect Nangong Si’s feelings?”

“If it’s true, it just means he has poor judgment. What’s more important—a little kid’s feelings or a sect leader’s integrity? Ah, if only he’d spoken up then, Rufeng Sect wouldn’t be in this mess today.”

“How can you say that? If he had publicly accused Nangong Liu, it would have been complete chaos in the upper cultivation realm… People’s

decisions are their own. If it were me, I probably wouldn't want to stick my neck out either."

"Heh, well, if it were me, I'd have totally exposed Nangong Liu for the monster he is. With these sorts of things, inaction makes you an accomplice."

Their voices were low, but Mo Ran's ears were sharp. Furious, he was about to walk over and have a word when a hand grabbed his sleeve. "Shizun!"

Chu Wanning shook his head, face impassive. "Don't waste your breath."

"But it's not like that at all! Can't they understand? How could you have possibly spoken out in that situation? Who's the one with poor judgment? It's plainly—"

"Are you angry?" Chu Wanning asked mildly.

Mo Ran nodded.

"Do you feel like you won't be satisfied unless you do something?"

Mo Ran nodded again.

"Okay. Then help cover my ears."

Mo Ran froze mid-nod.

"I don't intend to argue, but I'd rather not hear it. Cover my ears until they're done talking."

So Mo Ran stepped behind Chu Wanning and genuinely reached up to press his hands to Chu Wanning's ears. As he looked down at the man before him, he was overcome with outrage and heartache. He couldn't understand it. Why were people still disappointed in Chu Wanning when he did everything so well? Over two lifetimes Mo Ran had seen how this man lived for others with every breath, how he never indulged in a single day of selfishness. Why then did so many rush to criticize him behind his back for one controversial choice or ambiguous decision?

It seemed this was always the way of things. People were wont to shed tears of gratitude over an evil person's single good deed and viciously latch onto a good person's single mistake. In the past lifetime, Taxian-jun had slaughtered countless thousands. But one day, he'd done something completely out of character: he'd sent ten thousand gold to each master at Wubei Temple. Everyone had praised him to the skies—Taxian-jun had

suddenly laid down the butcher's knife to become a Buddha. For a short time, people spoke of Taxian-jun like some beneficent god, all because of this one tiny act of magnanimity.

And what of Chu Wanning? He was an indisputable grandmaster, one of the world's most benevolent cultivators. But at his tiniest error, people would open their mouths to spit malice unchecked.

Mo Ran had seen it play out too many times. When Chu Wanning was harsh, he was called cold-blooded. When Chu Wanning was soft, he was called timid. In his five years of traveling, Mo Ran had once overheard someone recount the incident with Landlord Chen at Butterfly Town. To hear them tell it, Chu Wanning had whipped his client bloody and injured an ordinary citizen solely because he was trying to garner attention.

"He's a man carved from wood, he's got no conscience to speak of. See now—any normal person would have a few friends, right? But look at Chu Wanning. At fifteen he turned his back on Master Huaizui's sect, and he's been on his own ever since. Is there anyone in this wide world who would claim him as a friend?"

"Right! And no matter how much in the wrong Butterfly Town's Landlord Chen might have been, he was still the client. Chu Wanning was way out of line. He cares nothing for his sect's reputation or the moral code of cultivators. If you ask me, he's been alone too long. His mind's twisted."

Chu Wanning's mind was twisted? Who was the twisted one here?! Had this man not sacrificed enough? Was it necessary to drain his blood, rend his flesh, and offer up his bones, just so he would be considered right and good, just so, in their estimation, he would live up to the title of Chu-zongshi?

Chu Wanning was tall and slender, but as Mo Ran, now fully grown, stood behind him to cover his ears, the top of Chu Wanning's head scarcely cleared his jaw. Chu Wanning was neither delicate nor weak, but as Mo Ran watched him through lowered lashes, he suddenly found Chu Wanning deeply pitiable. Boundless affection and tenderness welled up in him. He wanted, more than ever, to embrace this man. Not out of lust—he only wanted to put his arms around him. In this harsh world, Mo Ran only wanted to use his own flesh and blood to surround Chu Wanning with warmth. That was all.

However, Chu Wanning was more than accustomed to mindless criticisms like *if it had been me, I would have done this or that.* To him, these comments were wholly unremarkable.

The recollection from Jincheng Lake faded, and the shards of memory broke apart and came together again. But Chu Wanning looked away, his searching eyes finding Nangong Si. The young man had his back to him, still kneeling where he'd fallen. Chu Wanning sighed softly. Technically, he and Nangong Si weren't master and disciple, but it wouldn't be wrong to consider them so. He had hoped Nangong Si would go through life thinking Rong Yan had met an unfortunate demise while fighting demons. But the world hadn't bent to his wishes. Many years had elapsed, but the truth still burnt quick through that paper-thin deception, reducing it to ash.

In Chu Wanning's eyes, Nangong Si's kneeling figure overlapped with the child kneeling in the funeral hall from his memories. That child had clumsily tried to recite *Carefree Wandering*, but he hadn't practiced enough—he couldn't recount it smoothly. Wiping at his tears, he carefully recited the lines he knew for his mother.

"In the great northern sea is a fish called the kun. The kun is huge, I know not how many thousands of miles long. It turns into a bird called the peng…" He spoke haltingly. Each time he paused, his young face creased with a suffering too heavy for his years. "If the whole world… praised him…he rejoiced not. If the whole world…blamed him, he despaired…not, for he…for he knew his inner self from outside influence, he could tell…"

The child's soft voice caught in his throat; he couldn't go on. His small frame trembled slightly, like a willow catkin in the wind. At last, unable to hold back any longer, he covered his face and sobbed.

"Mom… I was wrong, Si-er was wrong… Please wake up, Mom… I won't goof off anymore. Wake up, please keep teaching me, okay?"

Later on, Nangong Si would inscribe *Carefree Wandering* from memory during every morning class. This text accompanied him all the way from when he was a small child until he grew into a high-spirited young master of Rufeng Sect.

Madam Rong was gone; she would never teach him again. Not long after, Chu Wanning left as well; he never looked back. Nangong Si took no one as his master. He relied on that patched-up old quiver and the

maxim, “As a gentleman of Rufeng Sect, I mustn’t indulge in greed, resentment, deception, slaughter, obscenity, plunder, or conquest.” Within the impenetrable walls of the world’s foremost cultivation sect, the child blossomed into an upstanding young hero, as unlike his father as night from day. Thus did fifteen years pass since Madam Rong’s death.

Another illusion coalesced overhead. This time, Nangong Liu’s sleeping quarters materialized before the crowd. The moon was full, and Nangong Liu was curled up in the bed, on which was laid a bamboo sleeping mat and hollow bamboo pillow. It was clearly summer in the illusion, yet Nangong Liu was swaddled in thick blankets and shivering uncontrollably, his lips blue.

Chu Wanning patted Mo Ran’s hand, still covering his ear. “Let go—I want to watch this.”

“You don’t have to,” said Mo Ran. “I can tell you about it later.” He didn’t want to release Chu Wanning. But after several insistent taps, Mo Ran knew persuasion would be futile. He let his hands fall and gloomily surveyed their surroundings—if he heard one more person blame Chu Wanning, he resolved to commit them to memory and take revenge later.

Within the illusion, Xu Shuanglin stepped through the doorway and made a crooked, careless bow to Nangong Liu. Nangong Liu seemed used to this and paid it no mind. Eyes bloodshot, he muttered, “Shuanglin, where’s the medicine? Where’s the medicine?”

“I prepared it, but it didn’t work.”

Nangong Liu wailed, snot and tears running down his face in his terror. “How… How… You said you could do it… I can’t stand it anymore; it feels like my bones have grown thorns! Q-quick, close the window. I don’t want any light in here, none at all…”

“It’s already closed. Tonight’s a full moon—even if you don’t set a foot outside, it’ll hurt,” said Xu Shuanglin. “It’s no use, you can’t escape it.”

“No—*no*! Where’s the medicine?” Nangong Liu was almost insensate with pain. “Where is it! Where! You said you could make it! I trusted you! Where’s the medicine!”

“I consulted that old scroll again—it’s impossible to formulate. The curse on you is too strong. Only one thing can reverse it.”

“What?! I’ll give you whatever you need! Just give me the medicine! Give me the medicine!”

“I need the spiritual core of the person who laid the curse,” said Xu Shuanglin.

Nangong Liu instantly paled. “Spiritual core… You need… You need his spiritual core?”

“Do you have it?”

“How would I have it!” Nangong Liu roared, hair disheveled, spittle flying from his mouth. “You know who cursed me! My dear shizun, that useless…worthless…*gentleman*! Luo Fenghua! He betrayed me, so I hacked him into a million pieces when I chased him off the sect leader’s seat! I sank his ashes into the most inauspicious blood pool and sent his soul to the Infinite Hells. He’ll never reincarnate! Even his skeleton must’ve rotted by now. Yet you want me to find his spiritual core? How am I supposed to find it? How?!”

Xu Shuanglin calmly waited for Nangong Liu to finish his tirade. Only after Nangong Liu had sunk into a despairing silence, his cries stifled in his throat, did Xu Shuanglin say slowly, “I have thought of a way to do it, but it’s incredibly difficult. Do you want to hear it?”

“Tell me, quick, hurry up and tell me!”

“Luo Fenghua’s deceased, yes, but you should be familiar with what’s written in the *Record of the Dead.* Ghosts that fall into the Infinite Hells may never reincarnate, but it’s still possible to gather their three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits to create a ghost form that resembles their mortal body. The more terrible their death, the more powerful this resurrected ghost form will be. Some even develop a gigantic external skeleton in order to protect the souls from scattering.”

“But how? It’s not like I can march down to the Infinite Hells to fish up his corpse…”

“You can’t go there, but we can summon him here.” Xu Shuanglin’s lips curled slightly, his expression so serene beneath the candlelight that he might have been chatting about whom to visit for tea. “The ghost realm and the living world are separated by a barrier. If you assemble five of the purest and strongest spiritual energies, you can open a passage to the Infinite Hells.”

“Open…to the Infinite Hells?”

Xu Shuanglin chuckled. “That’s right. You can rip open a passage and summon Luo Fenghua’s ghost form. His ghost form should be identical to his mortal body—including his spiritual core. If you eat his flesh and extract his spiritual core, the curse will be broken.” After a pause, he continued. “But assembling five great spiritual energies will be no easy task. Ideally we’d use the souls of the purest elemental spiritual essences… Don’t fret, let me see if there’s another way.”

Nangong Liu opened his mouth to speak, but all that emerged was an eerie howl. Dribbling tears and mucus, he crumpled onto the bed, shivering violently.

“Does it hurt that much?” Xu Shuanglin sighed. “That shizun of yours must have left such a vicious curse on the ring because he loathed you for killing your own master. How very pitiful.”

Nangong Liu whimpered.

“There there, bear with it. Once the sun comes up, it won’t hurt anymore,” Xu Shuanglin said. He sat cross-legged on the edge of the bed, cheek in one hand as he picked at his toes with the other. “I’ll stay and chat with you. The pain won’t be as bad if you’re distracted.”

Squirming deep into the bedding, Nangong Liu panted in agony.

“Hmm, what to talk about…” mused Xu Shuanglin. “How about Si-er? Real handful, isn’t he? By nature his spiritual core is unruly and prone to qi deviation. Doesn’t it run in the family? I heard his great-grandfather had a similar problem.”

Cowering under the blankets, Nangong Liu swallowed. “Mn.”

“What do you plan to do about it?”

“What do you mean?” Nangong Liu sounded irritated. “H-his illness is a far sight easier to deal with than mine. He’ll just have to take the right wife in the future… The—the flow of spiritual energy can be controlled through dual cultivation. So you’d better… You’d better just focus on my curse, all right…”

“Haven’t I been focusing on your curse this whole time? The more you think about it, the more it’ll hurt.” Scratching his toes, Xu Shuanglin grinned and returned to his subject. “But won’t that sort of dual cultivation harm his partner? I heard Si-er’s great-grandmother died quite young.”

“N-nonsense.”

“Aiya, I was just making conversation—to think she really died from

dual cultivation." Xu Shuanglin sighed. "Rufeng Sect is so treacherous. The sect leaders actually sacrifice their wives to solve their own problems."

"The lives of women…are worthless…to begin with."

"You really do have a low opinion of women, don't you," Xu Shuanglin remarked cheerfully.

"It's not as if you're ignorant of our founder's teachings."

"Oh, but I am. What did our founder say?"

"Rufeng Sect should be led by gentlemen."

"True enough."

"And what's a gentleman? A man, get it?"

Xu Shuanglin snorted. "Allow me to say something impudent—Sect Leader, you've misunderstood this phrase. In the heroes' tomb, our founder is probably turning over in his grave about now."

"You've never married. How could you understand?" Nangong Liu muttered. "When it comes to women…what use are they, aside from continuing the ancestral line—that's…that's their responsibility. My grandmother was more than willing to sacrifice her life for my grandfather's sake…"

"More than willing?" Xu Shuanglin laughed. "Then will you also find Si-er a wife more than willing to dual cultivate with him and sacrifice herself?"

Nangong Liu ground out, "I've already found one…"

Xu Shuanglin blinked. "What? Who? Who is it?" He shuffled nosily toward the middle of the bed, almost as if he wanted to yank Nangong Liu out of the covers. "How nice—so you already have a candidate for Rufeng Sect's young mistress! Come, who's the lucky lady."

Nangong Liu burrowed deeper into the blankets. Suppressing the pain, he said hoarsely, "Your foster daughter, Ye Wangxi."

Chapter 168:
Shizun, Someone's Messing with the Body

WITHIN THE ILLUSORY SCENE, Xu Shuanglin's eyes widened. Many of those watching followed suit.

Mo Ran had a vague feeling that something wasn't right. He'd lived two lifetimes, and when he considered this conversation in the context of what he knew from the past life, some thought-provoking details emerged.

He had been aware of Ye Wangxi's feelings for Nangong Si for two reasons: In the past lifetime, before Ye Wangxi died, she expressed her wish to be buried with Nangong Si. Ye Wangxi's identity as a woman had also been common knowledge before then—because Nangong Liu himself had arranged for her to marry Nangong Si. It was clear now that Nangong Si's father had been seeking a dual-cultivation vessel for his son. But not long after the betrothal, Nangong Si had met an unexpected end, while Ye Wangxi had lived on… Mo Ran couldn't help wondering if Nangong Si's death back then had been entirely coincidental.

I'd say not, he thought.

In the illusion, Xu Shuanglin's hands balled into fists. His smile remained, but his tone grew chilly. "You want Little Ye-zi to marry A-Si?"

"Mn, she's the best choice."

"How so?" Xu Shuanglin laughed. "You wanted to train her as the commander of the shadow guard, so you turned her into what she is now, neither man nor woman. Now you want to give her to Si-er? Aren't you worried that Si-er will scorn her?"

"He's actually none too pleased about it. I used to see him chatting and laughing with Ye Wangxi all the time, and he's always been good to her, so I thought he would accept it. But when I told him, he was furious! He said he doesn't like Ye Wangxi at all—he was just looking out for her because it's tough being a girl in the shadow guard. He refused the engagement."

Xu Shuanglin was silent.

"But how could I allow it? He got into a huge row with me, saying I don't take his decisions seriously, that I'm arranging his life as I please. And he's been avoiding Ye Wangxi ever since—these days he wants

nothing to do with her. The more I try to bring him around, the worse his attitude. Now he even accuses me of siding with Ye Wangxi. The boy doesn't know what's good for him." Nangong Liu fumed. "Is he rejecting her because he doesn't like her looks?"

"If the previous sect leader suddenly told you to marry a woman you didn't care for, would you do it?" Xu Shuanglin asked, quite sensibly. "I doubt it's a question of looks. You really don't respect him at all."

"He's too shallow! If he's going to take a wife, he might as well pick a useful and virtuous one. If it's pretty girls he's after, nothing's stopping him from taking a concubine after his health is stable." Nangong Liu sighed. "It's my fault for not…" He coughed. "For not recognizing Ye Wangxi's feelings for Si-er earlier. If she still looked the way she used to, Si-er would definitely like her."

"That's preposterous," said Xu Shuanglin. "Si-er still wouldn't accept it."

"Then he'd rather die? Dual cultivating with a man with an unstable spiritual core like his will be agonizing. If he married an ordinary woman…she couldn't withstand it…" Nangong Liu took a deep breath. "But Ye Wangxi is willing, because she loves him. She can take it."

"What do you mean, she's willing?!"

"I've asked her."

"What?!"

"I've asked her. I've already talked to her about this," Nangong Liu said. "She worries more for Si-er's affliction than her own life."

Xu Shuanglin lowered his head in silence, his thoughts inscrutable. "That girl is a fool," he said after a long pause.

By this point, Mo Ran was near certain—there was no way that in the past life Nangong Si had simply contracted some illness and died. It was vastly more likely that Xu Shuanglin had personally put him in the grave. With Nangong Si dead, Ye Wangxi could live.

That Nangong Si still lived in this lifetime was likely a stroke of luck in the form of Song Qiutong. As a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, Song Qiutong was ideally suited for dual cultivation. If she were to marry Nangong Si, his father would have no complaints—in fact, Nangong Liu probably felt like a meat pie had dropped from the heavens. He would no longer push Ye Wangxi to marry Nangong Si. And since Ye Wangxi and

Nangong Si were no longer engaged, Xu Shuanglin had no reason to move against Nangong Si in the current lifetime.

All this made perfect sense. Yet there was one thing that still mystified Mo Ran—why did Xu Shuanglin, who seemed every bit a deranged monster, care so deeply for Ye Wangxi? She was no more than his foster daughter, after all… What was this sly, mercurial man so fixated on?

What was he after?

This memory was fairly brief and ended shortly. When the illusion lit up again, it showed a scene from many years ago.

Nangong Liu was noticeably younger and thinner. He held a small object in his hand that twinkled with a jade-green light. As the onlookers peered closely at it, they realized it was the ring of the Rufeng Sect leader.

Once on its wearer's finger, this ring couldn't be taken off until the day the wearer left their post. If Nangong Liu was holding the ring, he hadn't yet officially become the master of Rufeng Sect.

An attendant entered and knelt in greeting. His robes were splattered with blood, as though he'd just stepped off the battlefield. This must be the night Nangong Liu slew his master and reclaimed Rufeng Sect's ring.

"Sect Leader, how should we deal with Luo Fenghua's body?"

Nangong Liu turned the ring in his hand. "Bury him in the heroes' tomb," he replied after a moment of consideration. "Regardless of all else, we were once master and disciple. Allow him to rest in dignity."

"Yes sir!" The attendant withdrew.

Mo Ran furrowed his brow—this couldn't be right. According to the previous memory, the Nangong brothers' teacher, Luo Fenghua, had been hacked to pieces by Nangong Liu. His body had been thrown into the blood pool of hell, where he'd been transmogrified into a vicious ghost. He had fallen into the Infinite Hells, never to reincarnate. Why was Nangong Liu saying he wanted to bury his master's intact body in the heroes' tomb?

Within the illusion, Nangong Liu rubbed the sect leader's glimmering ring. A strange and complicated light flashed in his eyes, containing both trepidation and longing.

His throat bobbed. At last, he slowly lifted his hand. Under the soft glow of the candlelight, he solemnly slid the ring onto his thumb. He stared at his hand, examining it carefully. The corners of his mouth slowly

curled, as if to herald a brilliant, delighted smile. But before the smile had spread over half his face, it froze.

Nangong Liu screamed and toppled from the sect leader's throne, his body convulsing.

"Ahh! *Ahhh!*"

"Sect Leader!"

"Sect Leader, what's wrong?"

Attendants rushed to help him. But none expected that when Nangong Liu lifted his head, his face would be bathed in blood. Countless tiny cuts had opened on his face, perfectly smooth and healthy moments ago. The bizarre wounds tore open and healed in an endless cycle, gushing blood without cease.

"What's going on?!" Nangong Liu cried in panicked terror. "It hurts… It hurts so bad… Why… Why is this happening? What's going on?!"

Footsteps sounded outside the door.

A man walked into the room outlined by moonlight, stepping onto the ice-cold brick with slender bare feet. He came before Nangong Liu, lifted the hem of his robes, and dropped to one knee.

The newcomer was none other than a younger Xu Shuanglin. He leaned down and brought Nangong Liu's face closer to examine it carefully. Nangong Liu gasped for breath, his tears, snot, and blood mixing miserably. Xu Shuanglin frowned in disgust. "How did this happen?"

"I don't…know… I don't know… Shuanglin-xiansheng… Xiansheng, please save me…"

Back then, Xu Shuanglin was still one of Nangong Liu's advisors; he didn't yet merit the title of elder.

Looking over the writhing Nangong Liu, Xu Shuanglin took hold of his right hand. When he saw the ring glittering there, his expression changed. "There's a curse of ten thousand calamities on this ring?"

The aides gathered nearby gasped in horror. Only Nangong Liu seemed to be lost in a trance of pain, oblivious to the details of this lethal curse. He raised his tear-streaked face in confusion. Glistening snot leaked from his nose, mingling with blood and dripping onto the tiles. "Ah, what? What's that?"

“It’s a deadly curse.” Xu Shuanglin wore an ugly expression. “Luo Fenghua left a terrible curse on this ring. Under its influence, the next wearer’s skin will tear open under the slightest bit of moonlight, consigning them to a life worse than death…every single night.”

“What?!”

“That’s not all.” Xu Shuanglin ran his fingers along the ring’s jade stone. He closed his eyes and sensed a rush of spiritual power from it. “When there’s a full moon, even if you don’t take a step outside, even if you hole up and avoid the moon’s light, you’ll still feel you’re being hacked to pieces. There’s no way to escape it…” He opened his eyes and glanced at Nangong Liu, who was curled on the ground, inhumanly wretched. “The only respite is death,” Xu Shuanglin finished softly.

Beneath the foul layer of gore, Nangong Liu’s pupils contracted. He looked like an oversized rat seized by panic, or like a snake surveying a gloomy cave. He twitched, almost comically, and muttered, “The only respite is death?”

“Mn.”

“The curse, it can’t—it can’t be broken?”

“It can’t be broken,” Xu Shuanglin responded. “At least I can’t think of a way right now… Perhaps later, you could…”

Before he could finish, Nangong Liu broke free of his grasp. Screaming and cackling, he staggered down the stairs, leaving a trail of blood to meander across the cold, bright tiles. As he wailed and shrieked, his voice grew so distorted, so shrill, that many of the onlookers had to cover their ears.

“Ha ha ha—a curse? You cursed me? Luo Fenghua! You stole the sect leader’s seat from my family, the Nangong clan! I left your corpse untouched when I ousted you, which was already…already perfectly just! You actually *cursed* me? How could you have the heart—how could you have the *nerve*! I wanted to acknowledge…the favor of your teaching… and bury you…in the heroes’ tomb… Hah! The heroes’ tomb! But you’ll have me suffer each night, my skin shredded to pieces—the only respite is death!” He howled, dragging himself inch by bloody inch to the gate of the main hall.

He slumped in the dark shadow of the hall’s great bronze gates, his clawlike fingers twitching ominously. Without warning, he struck the ground with his hand. “The only respite is death! How could you be so

heartless! Why would you be so heartless—bastard! You bastard! You ruined my life!"

"Sect Leader…" Unable to watch any longer, an attendant approached and tried to help him to his feet, but Nangong Liu bellowed and snarled. He looked utterly deranged. His face, presently a gory mess, had ever exuded a feeble and incompetent air. But now, a deep hatred was etched across his features. It danced in his pupils like wildfire, consuming the last scrap of his rationality.

"Let my…first order…as sect leader…be known…" Nangong Liu screamed hysterically.

The attendants knelt to hear the command.

"The previous sect leader, Luo Fenghua, has committed terrible crimes…of utmost evil… He cannot be pardoned! I command you to take his remains…and hack them into pieces… Turn him into paste!"

Xu Shuanglin stood calmly off to the side. He listened with his eyes lowered, his expression unreadable.

As his face tore open once more, Nangong Liu could no longer bear it and collapsed into desperate sobs. But he still completed his first order as leader of Rufeng Sect as he cried, grinding each word between his teeth. "Throw his body…into the blood pool…"

Your curse will mutilate me; the only respite is death. I'll throw you into the Infinite Hells, never to reincarnate.

The scene faded on a Nangong Liu staring with unseeing eyes, his voice hoarse as a broken xun[5] as he muttered, "Luo Fenghua, you bastard… You fucking *bastard*…"

The shards of memory scattered apart once again and gathered like snowflakes. The crowd was enthralled by the drama of Rufeng Sect's scandals laid bare. Some, like Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si, had no choice but to watch; the events depicted concerned them personally. But most of the audience was simply thrilled by this glimpse into the sordid secrets of others.

Envy was the world's ugliest emotion. Of those who had been invited to Nangong Si's wedding, how many had come to pay their sincere respects to Rufeng Sect? Upon walking through the magnificent palace gates, treading upon the spiritual stones worth their weight in gold, seeing those seventy-two stately cities—how many people felt pure admiration,

without an ounce of jealousy? The loftier the edifice, the greater the crowd watching when it collapsed. These people would litter the ground with shells of melon seeds as they gossiped, spittle flying a yard with each word. Along every avenue and alleyway, over a cup of tea or after a meal, the suffering of others was always the headiest spice for conversation.

Mo Ran almost couldn't bear to continue watching, but his need to understand the situation's layered complexities outweighed his distaste. Xu Shuanglin's memories seemed legitimate, and they offered an explanation for everything that had happened at Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs. Yet Mo Ran felt vaguely that a piece was missing. Some elements in this last memory didn't add up. But which ones?

He knitted his brows and pondered in gloomy silence.

Suddenly he saw a strange flash of light out of the corner of his eye. With the new illusion taking shape, no one had bothered to look beyond the forest, and therefore no one had noticed—

Mo Ran stood frozen, his face drained of color. Then he yelled at the top of his lungs: "It's apocalyptic fire!"

Everyone turned. "Apocalyptic fire? Where?"

"Over there—it's over there!"

"No! It's over there too!"

While everyone had been mesmerized by Xu Shuanglin's memories, Rufeng Sect's seventy-two cities had gone up in raging scarlet flames. The fire was yet distant, and the forest was dense; the blaze was easy to miss if their attention was elsewhere.

Apocalyptic fire was no natural occurrence—this type of spirit-fueled inferno could only be doused by a great rainstorm. It would otherwise be unstoppable until it consumed everything in its path, leaving behind not a single blade of grass.

Thick smoke billowed. The light of the flames was as water spilled on silk, rapidly blurring at the edges. In the distance, one bright arrow after another streaked like meteors from the seventy-two cities. But how could they be meteors? These were the Rufeng Sect disciples fleeing the conflagration on their swords.

Many blanched at this sight. "What's going on?" they cried. Even more turned on their heels and started running back toward Poetry Hall, calling the names of their companions.

Xue Zhengyong's face fell—Madam Wang was still in the hall, and she couldn't ride a sword… "A-Ran! Yuheng! I'll leave Meng-er to you guys. I gotta go check on my wifey!"

Mo Ran was worried too. He nodded. "Uncle, hurry, get Aunt out of there. We'll be here—I won't let anything happen to Xue Meng."

Xue Zhengyong clapped him heartily on the shoulder and promptly took off toward the flame-wreathed Poetry Hall.

Xu Shuanglin stood unmoving as chaos broke out around him. He flashed a brilliant grin and laughed. "What a sight—the monkeys scatter when the tree falls."

Mo Ran whipped around and saw Xu Shuanglin snap his fingers. Sparkling shards of memory rushed into his palm like millions of snowflakes. The illusion dispersed, revealing surroundings that were fast becoming a sea of fire. The Heavenly Rift to the Infinite Hells yet gaped in the sky, pouring golden-red lava that flowed sluggishly toward the forest.

As Mo Ran stared at Xu Shuanglin, a shiver ran down his spine. The look in this man's eyes was all wrong.

It was a look Mo Ran knew only too well. In his past life, he had seen eyes like this each time he stood before a mirror at Sisheng Peak—at the deserted Wushan Palace—after Chu Wanning died. Eyes filled with madness and bloodlust, with self-destructive despair; the eyes of someone who wanted to take every living person to the grave with him.

"Do you want to destroy Rufeng Sect?"

At Mo Ran's question, Xu Shuanglin's first reaction was to rub his toes together. Then he said with a sliver of a smile, "So what if I do? I'm destroying my own home—who asked for your opinion?"

"Your own home…"

Xu Shuanglin stepped over the roiling lava toward Nangong Liu. He grabbed the Rufeng Sect Leader by the collar and hoisted him from the ground. Xu Shuanglin looked up. "That's right, my own home."

He forced Nangong Liu to face him. In front of that man, whose last breath had been suspended by the lingchi fruit, who was living a life worse than death even now—Xu Shuanglin lifted one hand, then the other to his own neck. Starting from the base, he dug into skin and languidly, unhurriedly, ripped upward, inch by inch…

There was a quiet hiss as he peeled away an exquisite human skin

mask, made from the painted slough of an ancient snake demon. Beneath was a face that possessed no more the charm of youth.

Nangong Liu froze in shock. Then he began trembling and cowering. He felt like he was suffocating, but still he eked out some faltering, broken words. “You… It’s you…?! You’re…not dead? You’re still… You’re still…”

“Not dead. Still alive. After all, how could I possibly die before you did?” Xu Shuanglin smiled broadly. “In every respect I am your superior, and longevity will be no exception. Even after you rot, I’ll be alive and kicking. What’s wrong? It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other—are you speechless with joy?”

Xu Shuanglin conjured a flame and touched it to that mask. The fire burned all the way down to his fingertips, but either he was too distracted to mind it or felt no pain. He shook out his hand and pressed a charred fingertip to the side of Nangong Liu’s mouth.

Xu Shuanglin cocked his head and grinned. “Long time no see, esteemed Sect Leader… Or should I say…*Ge*?”

Chapter 169:
Shizun, It's the First Forbidden Technique

"NANGONG XU!" one of the older men among the remaining spectators cried. "Is that him?"

"It's Nangong Xu…"

"Didn't he die ages ago?!"

"Luo Fenghua killed him with his own hands… How is he… How is he still alive?"

Ye Wangxi was stunned, her elegant face alarmingly pale. She shook her head and took a step back. "Yifu…" she murmured at last through trembling lips, her eyes full of tears.

Xu Shuanglin glanced toward Ye Wangxi with a small smile. "Little Ye-zi, come over here next to Yifu. I won't hurt you."

"Don't you dare touch her!" someone yelled ferociously. Ye Wangxi felt her wrist grabbed and turned to see Nangong Si, his eyes overflowing with a pain, raw as an open wound. "Ye Wangxi, get behind me."

Xu Shuanglin chuckled. "My dear nephew, why is your temperament so different from your dad's? You're just like your mother."

"Shut up! You've no right to mention my mom!"

"Don't I?" Xu Shuanglin drawled. "Didn't you know? The one your mom liked best was originally me, not your dad."

Nangong Si's face contorted in fury and disgust, madness and agony flashing through his eyes. The sight seemed to please Xu Shuanglin. He cackled raucously, as if such bone-deep hatred nourished his soul.

"Your dad ruined my reputation; he stole everything from me. But who cares! Rufeng Sect… Rufeng Sect was in *his* hands when it met its doom! So go on and hate me, Si-er—go on and hate me, Dage! Ha ha ha ha—did you all think poor little Nangong Xu would die so easily? Did you think I'd lie down in my tomb like a good boy and watch you all make merry in the living world?" His smile twisted into a leer. "You must be dreaming!" he spat.

He turned his attention back to Nangong Liu, who was hanging on to life by an unbreakable thread. Xu Shuanglin yanked his brother up by the

collar as if grabbing a palmful of filthy mud.

"How well could the brilliant Rufeng Sect fare in the hands of such trash? Heh, how laughable! Sect leader or no, I still played you for a fool all these years. After all, didn't you wag your tail like a good dog and fetch me whatever I asked?" He gave Nangong Liu's bloody cheek a cheerful pat. The smile curving his lips was affectionate, but his eyes flashed with menace. "Dage, you're nothing but a pathetic coward, a useless piece of shit."

Guyueye's sect leader Jiang Xi raised his voice. "Sir, did you show us these scenes for the sole purpose of destroying Rufeng Sect's centuries of history and tradition?"

Xu Shuanglin turned his head and blinked. "Centuries of history? What of them? If traditions are abolished, they can be formed anew. If the seventy-two cities are burned, they can be built again. The only thing that will please me is the death of a human heart, its ashes scattering on the wind." He flashed Jiang Xi a brilliant smile. "I'd like to destroy every one of your hearts."

He spoke with a calm that was all the more terrifying when paired with the gleeful look on his face.

Nangong Si had had enough. Vengeful fire blazed in his eyes, choked with the thick smoke of desperation. Those eyes harbored a hell-bent hatred and not a shred of self-preservation. Before the others could react, a whistle of his jade flute brought a faewolf as tall as three men bounding out of the woods, soaring through the air to land before him. Nangong Si vaulted onto his back, their shadows leaping forward before he was even fully seated.

"Mantuo, come!" A holy weapon in the form of a dazzling bow appeared in Nangong Si's hand. With perfect form astride the faewolf, he drew the jade bow Mantuo, his features written with feverish hostility. He loosed three arrows in rapid succession, all flying toward Xu Shuanglin's vital points.

Xu Shuanglin grinned. "Si-er, you naughty boy." He sidestepped the first two arrows and, seeing that he couldn't avoid the third, casually seized the flabby, half-dead body of his elder brother to block it.

Despite everything, Nangong Liu was still Nangong Si's father. However callous Nangong Liu had been, their bond of blood was a habit carved into Nangong Si's bones. Nangong Si flinched, and his temple

throbbed. His sharp canines cut into his lip, filling his mouth with blood…

"Do you still want to play with Uncle?" Xu Shuanglin said with a genial smile. "If you do, I'll indulge you."

"Nangong Xu! *I'm going to kill you!"*

"What's a cute kid doing yelling about killing?"

Although Xu Shuanglin spoke leisurely, his movements were anything but as he turned to face off against his nephew.

Within a few moves, it was clear that Xu Shuanglin's skill was exceptional. The audience gaped in awe. Some thought it was no wonder he'd been so bent out of shape when Nangong Liu was named the next sect leader. The difference in magical ability between these two brothers was like that between heaven and earth, between clouds and mud. The elder was hardly even fit to carry the younger's shoes.

"Wow, he's good."

"Didn't they say Nangong Xu stole his brother's techniques back in the day? How is he so powerful now?"

"Looks like he'd give any top zongshi a run for his money…"

The few onlookers who had initially thought to step to the fore with Nangong Si now shrank back one after another. Some quick-witted disciples, concluding that Rufeng Sect was irrevocably doomed, seized the chance to make their own escape amidst the chaos. Their cowardice proved contagious—in no time, most of the remaining cultivators had fled. Even the sectmates of the still-unconscious chess pieces turned tail and left their helpless sect siblings behind. Within moments, only a handful of people remained in the hunting grounds' forest.

Mo Ran surveyed the scene. Only he, Chu Wanning, and Ye Wangxi had stayed behind—

Wait, no—so had Jiang Xi.

Now this was unexpected. Jiang Xi was the richest man in the world, the leader of Rainbell Isle, the most successful businessman on earth, and the head of the cultivation realm's foremost sect after Rufeng. No one would've guessed *he* would willingly tend to such a stressful and thankless task.

"Jiang-zhangmen…"

At the sound of this small, quavering voice, Mo Ran looked back

again in astonishment. There was one more person here. The man cowered behind a tangerine tree, face gray and lips trembling, yet had managed to remain while his fellows fled.

Li Wuxin?!

Li Wuxin—for it was indeed he—swallowed. His face was a greasy yellow, the jaundiced hue of rice husks, covered in a sheen of sweat. As the leader of the upper cultivation world's bottom-ranked sect, he looked uncertainly at the others. "Shall we make our move together?"

Jiang Xi didn't answer right away. He swept a swift glance over the rest and said with practiced authority, "Li-zhuangzhu, you're with me. I'll save the chess pieces who are still fast asleep. You'll be responsible for conveying them to safety on your sword."

"Yes, yes yes."

"As for Chu-zongshi and Mo-zongshi…"

"Mo Ran, go assist Nangong Si," said Chu Wanning. "I'll seal the Heavenly Rift before I join you."

This Heavenly Rift was unlike Butterfly Town's. It wasn't teeming with evil ghosts—after the initial onrush, only the golden-red lava of hell still flowed from its maw. At this point the danger was much reduced, but given the massive size of the rip, Chu Wanning was undoubtedly best suited to mending it.

Mo Ran released Jiangui's Ten Thousand Coffins, and the twenty-odd young cultivators who'd become chess pieces tumbled to the ground. Jiang Xi wasted no time. He swept back his green sleeves and sprinkled a generous dose of medicinal powder over them to stabilize their weak condition. Then he inclined his head toward Li Wuxin. "If you please."

Li Wuxin nodded and summoned his sword. The glowing, jade-green blade and was of an ordinary size, large enough to carry two or three people. Following Li Wuxin's silent incantation, it rapidly grew as it hung in midair until it was more than ten feet in length. Jiang Xi carried the unconscious cultivators onto the sword one by one. By the time he reached Xue Meng at the end of the line, Li Wuxin's weapon was at capacity.
"I can't carry any more," said Li Wuxin. "Let's figure it out after I make this first trip."

Jiang Xi glanced at their surroundings—sparks were flying on all sides, and the tide of spiritual energy was spiraling frighteningly out of

control. The tangerine trees around them collapsed one after another, breaking like rotten twigs. The spot where they stood would soon share the same fate.

With no other choice, he shot Xue Meng a resentful glare. “Forget it—you go ahead. I’ll handle this last brat myself.” He intoned in a deep voice, “Xuehuang, come.”

A silver longsword emitting light of a splendid blue hue materialized beneath his feet. Xuehuang was of exquisite make—the hilt delicate, the filigree beautiful beyond measure—but was obviously ill-suited for carrying a heavy load. Still, it could handle the weight of two people.

Jiang Xi scooped the unconscious Xue Meng into his arms. As he remembered Xue Meng’s earlier disrespect and the fact that he was the son of Madam Wang and Xue Zhengyong, he couldn’t keep the disgust from his face. Li Wuxin was dumbfounded by Sect Leader Jiang’s expression. Surely Jiang Xi wouldn’t toss Sisheng Peak’s young master from the sky and allow him to be smashed to paste, would he?

“What are you looking at?” Jiang Xi snapped. “Hurry up and go. Get them out of here so you can come back and help. We can’t let Rufeng Sect burn to the ground like this.”

With the slowly awakening youngsters safely aboard, the two holy weapons rose on the wind and sped into the distance.

By now, Chu Wanning had repaired all but the very last section of the Heavenly Rift, and Mo Ran had joined Nangong Si in furious battle against Xu Shuanglin. Mo Ran’s strength was formidable, and Nangong Si was out to kill. Capable as Xu Shuanglin was, even he was beginning to flag under their combined onslaught. With the tides slowly turning against him, Xu Shuanglin called to Ye Wangxi, “Ye-zi, why are you just standing there? Will you let your yifu die like a dog? Come help me out already!”

Ye Wangxi clenched her fists. Her expression was deeply pained, and she trembled from head to toe. But she refused to advance, instead retreating one step at a time.

“You’re really going to sit there without lifting a finger? Have you forgotten who carried you home from the tangerine grove when you were little? Who raised you? Who gave you your name?”

“…No.”

Ye Wangxi was on the verge of breaking down. But everyone—sect

leader and elders included—had always treated her as a boy. This nightmarish situation, too, she faced with her usual stoicism. Her back was ruler-straight, and though a red flush stood out on her checks, she didn't break into sobs as an ordinary girl might. Yet she felt as though her body had disintegrated. If anyone were to nudge her right now, she was sure her skin and organs would slough away from her skeleton, dissolving into mush.

Xu Shuanglin cursed under his breath, but he didn't coerce her further. He turned to fight the other two with renewed determination.

The knife in his hand emitted a metallic screech. The blade was a top-grade weapon from Kunlun Taxue Palace, but it was at its limit. As Mo Ran's willow vine lashed it once again, it shattered and fell to the ground in pieces.

"What are you going to fight with now?" Mo Ran asked coldly.

Xu Shuanglin was running out of options.

At that moment, there was a distant sound from above, like an echoing explosion from a bygone age. Xu Shuanglin jerked his head up to find Chu Wanning had patched the Heavenly Rift. The night sky above the forest of the hunting grounds returned to its customary black, and the lava of the underworld, cut off from its source, scattered instantly into motes of red-gold that drifted into the woods like fireflies.

Chu Wanning floated down from the night sky against a backdrop of stars. His muted formal robes billowed in the gale, enhancing the porcelain paleness of his face and the peerless handsomeness of his features. But his elegant appearance couldn't conceal the murderous intent that radiated from every inch of him.

"Fuck." Xu Shuanglin gritted his teeth.

He could barely handle Mo-zongshi. If Chu-zongshi joined the fray, was there anyone in the world of cultivation who could oppose their combined might?

Xu Shuanglin took a step back. He slashed his palm with the knife to draw blood, which he used to smear a spell array on his forehead. "Still no rescue?" he growled. "How long are you gonna drag this out?!"

As he lifted his hand, his fingernails lengthened, growing by several inches. Luo Fenghua's corpse still lay on the lake—Xu Shuanglin reached down and ripped his chest open, extracting his bloody spiritual core with a

wet sucking noise. He tucked it into his lapels and leapt backward in flight. To everyone's surprise, he dragged his half-dead brother along with him. A twitch of his hand dispelled the barrier below him, and he jumped into Ganquan Lake, sinking straight to the bottom…

Mo Ran started—the holy weapon Bugui, which had just been used to open the Heavenly Rift to the underworld, was still at the bottom of the lake!

Xu Shuanglin was an adept swimmer. Even towing Nangong Liu's dead weight, his bare feet propelled him swiftly through the water to grab the jet-black blade in the middle of the lake. The moment he broke the surface, another crack appeared in the sky.

Chu Wanning frowned. "A Heavenly Rift?"

His tone was uncertain. The crack was small, only the height of a man, and emitted no dark qi. This was clearly no Heavenly Rift to the ghost realm.

With a great splash, Xu Shuanglin sprang from the lake, his brother in one hand and Bugui in the other. Brandishing the holy weapon, he hurled a beam of sword qi that slowed his three pursuers in their tracks, then seized the chance to flit upward.

High above, a delicate hand reached out from the narrow rift and gripped Xu Shuanglin's arm.

"It's the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death!" Chu Wanning exclaimed. Realization struck him like a bolt of lightning, and his eyes went wide. He had maintained his composure until that moment—even the Zhenlong Chess Formation hadn't fazed him. But now, the color drained from his face. Stricken, his hands curled into fists within his sleeves.

Mo Ran felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown in his face. He whipped around. *"What?!"*

How?!

Of the three forbidden techniques, this was the most powerful. Legend had it that it could rip apart time and space, defying fate to bring together people of distant eras. Before their very eyes was the most taboo of all the lost techniques of the cultivation world: the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death!

Chapter 170:
Shizun, Don't Look, It's Filthy

IN AN INSTANT, the hand that had emerged from the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death pulled Xu Shuanglin into another universe.

Nangong Si made to pursue, but it was impossible. The instant Xu Shuanglin crawled through that rift in the heavens, it sealed itself with a *bang.* All that remained in the night sky was a drifting scrap of Xu Shuanglin's hem that hadn't made it through the Gate. The slip of fabric fluttered down through the stillness and landed on the lake, where the white cloth quickly soaked through and sank below the water's surface.

"How," Mo Ran muttered. "How could someone have mastered the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death?" As Taxian-jun in his past life, he knew better than anyone the three forbidden techniques: the Zhenlong Chess Formation, Rebirth, and the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. The first two forbidden techniques were exceedingly difficult to learn, yet it was not unheard of for some in the cultivation world to master them. Mo Ran in the past life and Master Huaizui in this one were two such examples.

Historical accounts of the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death, on the other hand, were passing few. The most recent was a tale from thousands of years ago, in which a grandmaster cultivator lost his beloved daughter and, heartbroken, opened the forbidden gate to retrieve his daughter from another universe and bring her back into his own. Unfortunately, his counterpart within the other world discovered him. He, too, was a father. How could he allow anyone—even himself—to wrest from him his beloved daughter? As the two squared off, fighting to kill, the space-time rift warped. In the end, their daughter was swept into the gap between worlds and reduced to dust.

Upon his return, the cultivator, rent with grief, sealed the forbidden technique scrolls within the Flame Emperor's sacred tree. The vast river of time flowed onward, and he became the last person to fully master the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. No one had witnessed this forbidden technique performed in centuries, and present-day cultivators had grown increasingly skeptical that such a technique, able to distort space and time itself, had ever existed in the first place.

In the past life, however, Mo Ran had gotten hold of a fragment of those ancient scrolls. Drawing on his own boundless cultivation, he had succeeded in opening a small rift of a similar nature. But that rift crossed only space, not time, and it was far from stable. Mo Ran had tossed a rabbit into the gap, intending to send it thousands of miles away. The rabbit was indeed transported—but on account of the rift's instability, the creature emerged inside-out. Its organs were exposed, and its skin and fur had been sealed within. What was left amounted to no more than a scrambled lump of gore, its small heart still beating…

Mo Ran experimented with the technique many more times after that, but five or six attempts in a hundred would go horribly wrong. Sometimes the body would be mutilated, torn to pieces. Sometimes the brain would emerge right away, but the rift wouldn't disgorge the rest until an hour later.

Even these mediocre results had been sufficient to make waves in the cultivation world. Many believed that Mo Ran had uncovered and mastered the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. But Mo Ran himself remained uncertain. He had no firsthand experience of this forbidden technique, last used thousands of years ago. But if the records were to be believed, the technique he had cobbled together was nowhere close to the genuine Space-Time Gate of Life and Death.

Chu Wanning soared across the surface of the lake and plucked that scrap of Xu Shuanglin's robe from the water. Closing his eyes, he carefully probed its residual spiritual energy.

He let out a breath, but his face was written with worry. Chu Wanning shook his head. "It's not a complete Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. Whoever created it has only mastered part of the ancient scroll. Judging by the spiritual energy on this fabric, it's merely a Space Gate, not a Space-Time Gate."

"What does that mean?"

"It means there's still a great difference in power between the technique we just witnessed and the real first forbidden technique," Chu Wanning replied. "I can sense that the remnant spiritual energy has only traversed space. Someone pulled Nangong Xu through this rift to instantaneously bring him somewhere else."

Mo Ran thought to himself—was this not similar to the Gate he had produced in his past life? If so, such an achievement wasn't inconceivable.

But his heart felt heavy. “What if it were the genuine article though?” he asked. “What could that accomplish, if mastered?”

Chu Wanning’s expression shifted subtly. After a pause, he answered, “If it were the real Space-Time Gate of Life and Death, the caster wouldn’t be limited to creating a rift between two different locations. They could bring Nangong Xu into an entirely different world.”

At this, Mo Ran’s face fell slightly. He pressed his lips into a tight line and didn’t make another sound.

In the past lifetime, he hadn’t been well-read and didn’t know which of the records he’d gathered could really be trusted. He had doubted the reliability of the legend about the grandmaster cultivator who had opened a rift in time to fetch his daughter from another world. But after hearing these words from Chu Wanning, Mo Ran was convinced.

With this sense of conviction came a deep chill. During the five years Chu Wanning slept in the Red Lotus Pavilion, Mo Ran had read many of the classics. He had vaguely begun to feel over the course of his studies that the phenomenon of his own rebirth was quite peculiar. In the past life, he had never encountered the genuine Rebirth technique. He had imagined this so-called “rebirth” would be what happened to him—a person would be returned to some point in time before their death and start anew from there.

But in the present life, Mo Ran had personally seen Master Huaizui execute this forbidden technique. It had left him confounded: Huaizui’s technique had summoned Chu Wanning’s souls from the underworld and returned them to his mortal body, which hadn’t decayed or endured serious damage. Afterward, Chu Wanning went on living in the world he knew. This was completely different from what Mo Ran had experienced. If someone had used the same technique as Master Huaizui to revive Mo Ran after his death in the past life, he would have been reborn in Wushan Palace. He would have still been the abominable Emperor Taxian-jun. Chu Wanning, Shi Mei, his aunt and uncle…they’d all be dead. No one would be by his side.

Thus Mo Ran had reasoned that there might be more than one type of Rebirth, and differing methods had been used for his and Chu Wanning’s resurrections. But now, hearing Chu Wanning confirm the existence of the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death—the most mysterious of the three forbidden techniques—Mo Ran was struck by a horrifying thought.

Could it be that, in addition to the Rebirth technique, he had been additionally subjected to the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death? And his evil souls that ought to have been tormented in another universe for their crimes were transported through a rift in space-time to a year when none of it had yet occurred, when everything could still be turned back?

If that were the case, then wouldn't the one behind the scenes have been spying on all he'd done? Wouldn't that person have plotted everything, including his rebirth, then watched in silence from the shadows?

A violent shiver ran down Mo Ran's spine.

Before he could think on it further, he heard a thunderous explosion from the direction of the apocalyptic fire burning in the distance.

"Let's go take a look," said Chu Wanning.

Yet even as he said the words, the flames roared to new heights as they consumed the seventy-two cities of Rufeng Sect. It seemed the blaze had reached some device Xu Shuanglin had planted beforehand. The inferno spiraled dozens of feet into the air, its glow piercing the heavens. They needed go no closer to see—by now, the raging fire eating up the night's darkness was visible from hundreds of miles away.

Xue Zhengyong had already brought Madam Wang out of the conflagration. Turning his head, he saw the towering flames weave into the form of two bodies, passionately intertwined. The figures of a man and woman gradually took shape. "What's…going on here?" he asked in astonishment.

Madam Wang's upbringing in a prestigious sect had exposed her to a great number of precious artifacts. Her expression changed at once. "This is a type of painted scroll that records memories. Its magic is self-contained and requires no other supporting techniques; once the user creates it, the memories sealed inside will emerge in the flames of apocalyptic fire. Whatever scenes are recorded in the scroll will play repeatedly until the fire dies out."

"Until the fire dies?" Xue Zhengyong, watching as Rufeng Sect was swallowed up in the inferno, couldn't help but look on with some pity. Most people, if they planned a daring exposé, would simply gather some witnesses and speak their piece while presenting what evidence they had—that was typically plenty. But Xu Shuanglin? The man was insane. He'd assembled a swath of his own memories in a scroll and set whole cities

aflame just to expose to the world the filthy secrets of his own sect. Taking the spreading flames as his canvas, he'd magically amplified these whispered conversations of the past into a thunderous rumbling, as though to ensure even the deaf would hear.

"What is Xu Shuanglin even *doing*?" Xue Zhengyong sat on his enlarged iron fan in midair with Madam Wang beside him, his features cast into fragmented light and shadow by the towering inferno beneath. "Has he not dug up enough of Rufeng Sect's rotten deeds, that he needs to uncover more?" he muttered.

Madam Wang said nothing.

"It's enough, he's done enough. He's bloodied Rufeng Sect beyond recognition; it's become the laughingstock of the cultivation world. How is he still not satisfied…"

A woman's voice boomed from the sea of hellfire. The cultivators who had paused mid-flight to watch the fiery scene take shape were startled, Xue Zhengyong among them.

"Liu-ge, we aren't as young as we were. Why are you—why are you still so insatiable… Ngh…"

Following this weak groan, the blurry outlines of the pair in the flames gradually sharpened. The apocalyptic fire that blanketed Rufeng Sect's seventy-two cities twisted into a massive image of two nude, undulating bodies. An auspicious five-bat motif tattooed on the woman's delicate arm was rendered the size of a building, so enormous that onlookers could see the individual hairs inked on each bat.

Almost as one, the assembled cultivators turned to look with astonishment at Jiangdong Hall, one of the ten great sects of the upper cultivation realm. Jiangdong Hall's disciples were still more horrified. Their eyes were round as bronze bells as they stared blankly at their sect leader, Qi Liangji. This sect leader was still relatively new to her position. Ashen-faced, she stood stiff on her sword in the night wind. On her arm, clear as day, was that very bat motif tattoo.

Never had she imagined that someone not only had witnessed her secret affair with Nangong Liu, they'd turned it into a memory scroll that was now being shown, so plainly and starkly, to the masses. Her mind went blank.

Mo Ran's mind had gone blank in much the same way. The instant this image of Sect Leader Qi appeared in the sky, he covered Chu

Wanning's eyes. "Don't look."

Chu Wanning was speechless.

Mo Ran had acted on subconscious impulse born of his possessive desire for Chu Wanning. He'd once desired to possess his body, taking all his panting breaths, soft moans, and broken sobs for himself. Now, he had an even greater desire to preserve for himself Chu Wanning's clean, pure heart. "Don't look, it's filthy stuff."

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Isn't it a little too filthy to hide? Chu Wanning wondered. What good did it do to cover his eyes? The lewd sounds of lovemaking echoed in his ears. But he remained silent, letting Mo Ran fold his hands over his eyes. Try as he might to stay calm, his face still heated beneath Mo Ran's palms.

"Ahh… A—a little faster… Keep—keep going…*nnngh*…"

The pair stood in awkward silence. Perhaps because his eyes were covered, Chu Wanning's available senses became all the more acute. Sect Leader Qi's delicate voice seemed to have sprouted downy hairs that brushed along his spine, leaving a prickling itch in their wake. Whether it was genuine or not, her voice trembled with passionate fervor, as if the man's incursion was the solid root of a tree burrowing into fertile soil, plunging so deep it brought spring water streaming from the mud, suffusing the air with the earthy smell of petrichor.

This development made Mo Ran incredibly anxious, at a loss for what to do. He wanted to continue shielding Chu Wanning's eyes, but also to cover his ears. He wanted to shift his hands to cover Chu Wanning's ears, but he wasn't willing to move them from Chu Wanning's eyes. Even worse—in this newly erotic atmosphere, Mo Ran felt that the deepest longing of his heart wasn't to cover Chu Wanning's ears or his eyes. A vicious beast crouched in his chest, urging him on with a roar.

It was wholly, completely inappropriate—yet he realized suddenly that what he wanted most desperately was to grab Chu Wanning from behind. He wanted to take this man, so unguarded with him, and crush him in his arms, caress his back, suck his earlobe, then wrench his chin around, hold him fast, and kiss the breath from him.

He fixed his dark stare upon Chu Wanning across the gap of mere inches between them. His breathing gradually grew heavy. Chu Wanning was strong and fierce, but no longer a match for Mo Ran in terms of physical strength. If Mo Ran really wanted to overpower him—as he had in the past life—Chu Wanning wouldn't stand a chance. All this stubborn man's strength could only be directed toward biting back the moans between his teeth. No matter how Chu Wanning resisted, Mo Ran would crush him, devour him—such would be his fate.

The man in front of him was oblivious to the dangerous thoughts racing through Mo Ran's head. In an attempt to dispel the awkwardness, Chu Wanning quietly grumbled, "This is really outrageous."

“Mn.” Mo Ran’s throat was dry, his eyes beginning to water. “Very outrageous,” he agreed in a muffled voice.

“Qi Liangji was clearly a married woman. She stepped up as sect leader of Jiangdong Hall after the recent death of her husband. To think she’d turn around and behave like this with Nangong Liu.” He scornfully concluded: “Absurd.”

“Mn.” It was unseemly—Mo Ran knew it was—but the hunger in his heart was irrepressible. Without realizing, he’d leaned in until his lips practically skimmed the back of Chu Wanning’s neck. “It’s totally absurd,” he said distractedly.

He swept an indifferent glance over the sky, where Nangong Liu and Qi Liangji’s pornographic production was still hurtling along. He dimly recalled that Qi Liangji was quite a bit older than Nangong Liu. Her husband had been Nangong Liu’s sworn elder brother, so by rights of seniority, Nangong Liu should be calling her his elder sister-in-law.

How did two people who seemed perfectly respectable fall into such a sordid affair?

As he lost himself in thought, Nangong Liu’s voice floated over from the great fire. When Mo Ran looked up, those two shameless individuals were going at it in a brand-new position. Nangong Liu was goading her: “If you want it, call me ‘gege.’”

Wait…what? Mo Ran was gobsmacked. *You can…do that?* Qi Liangji was plainly much older than him. How—how could she call him gege?

Taxian-jun had obviously underestimated Nangong Liu’s abilities, while crediting Qi Liangji’s pride too much. This woman had been provoked past the point of endurance. She gasped and moaned, and panted without a mote of hesitation, “Gege… Ge… Don’t tease me… *Ahh*…”

Mo Ran’s skin was as thick as a city wall, but even he couldn’t help but blush. At the same time, Chu Wanning’s long eyelashes trembled lightly against his palms, almost as though he knew of the warm itch in Mo Ran’s heart and sought to soothe the tingle in his bones with this tiny movement. But his lashes were too light and soft—how could it be enough to dispel that itch? This half-hearted relief seemed only to intensify it. Mo Ran stared absently at the nape of the man in front of him. In the dimness, a light, unexpected flush the hue of peach blossoms seemed to pinken that pale skin.

Heart beating like a drum, Mo Ran blinked. He didn't dare look longer and lowered his gaze. Beneath his lashes, his pupils were the black of burnt ash still smoking with heat. Layer over layer of fiery sparks smoldered beneath that darkness. It would take but a single breath from Chu Wanning, saturated with desire, for those embers to spark to life, for an entire grassland to go up in a roar of orange flame.

Mo Ran felt a sharp twinge of regret—if only he'd been half as creatively malicious as Nangong Liu in his past life. If only he'd witnessed this brand of bullying earlier. Then he would doubtless have fucked Chu Wanning senseless, rendered this aloof man a panting mess beneath him, and made Chu Wanning call him *gege*.

It then occurred to him that, in this lifetime, Chu Wanning had indeed once called him by this moniker. In fact, he'd even called him *shige*. It was just that Mo Ran hadn't known Xia Sini's true identity at the time, so he'd thought that little shidi of his was only a little shidi. Heat flared within his chest as he recalled this now.

His reckless desire, it seemed, knew no bounds. Despite understanding perfectly well that it was impossible, he couldn't help fantasizing. He pictured Chu Wanning lying on the bed, damp strands of hair stuck to his sweat-sheened forehead, phoenix eyes narrowed at Mo Ran. A gaze filled with indignance and stubborn reserve, all burned away by the flames of desire into a slight, dewy redness at the corners of his eyes. His lips lightly parted, as if fighting the urge to bite them closed. But in the end, they'd part again as he called in a hoarse, tearful voice, *Shige*…

Mo Ran felt the breath run out of him.

At some point—he had no idea when—he'd let go of Chu Wanning. The remaining rational piece of him must have realized that continuing to cover Chu Wanning's eyes so intimately would tempt him into committing some disgraceful act. Passionate love was impossible to restrain, and Mo Ran had tasted of this fruit too many times before. He knew firsthand the exquisite ecstasy of its flavor.

Chu Wanning turned to look at him. His cheeks were pink, but his chin was unconsciously lifted, and his eyes shone bright and haughty. "What's wrong?"

Mo Ran flicked a glance at his lips, then cleared his throat softly and turned his face aside. "It's nothing."

After their lovemaking was over, Nangong Liu stroked Qi Liangji's hair and asked lazily, "Have you asked your sect's elders to consider how they want to proceed?"

Qi Liangji blinked open her charming eyes. "Proceed with what?"

"Look at you. You know what I'm talking about, yet here you are playing coy with me," said Nangong Liu. "It's the same old thing. Didn't you tell me after you become the sect leader we should merge Jiangdong Hall into Rufeng Sect?"

"Oh, is that what it was." Qi Liangji smiled. "Don't be so hasty. The sect leader's ring hasn't yet grown warm on my hand."

"But you should make haste. Once our two sects become one, I'll appoint you the head warden of Rufeng Sect. Tens of thousands will be at your beck and call…"

Nangong Liu reached out to fondle her waist again as if he couldn't help himself. But Qi Liangji appeared less than pleased. Though her face was still sweetly flushed, she reached out to stop him. "It wasn't easy to rise to the position of sect leader. And you won't even let me stay here a bit longer? What good is it to be the head warden? You still won't officially marry me and bring me home as the madam of Rufeng Sect?"

"You know Si-er's temper—there's no way he'd accept it if I remarried." Nangong Liu sounded embarrassed. "Consider our positions. Marriage isn't just a personal matter. Who knows what sort of vulgar gossip we'd be subjected to."

"Vulgar gossip?!" Fury rose in Qi Liangji's eyes as she raised her head to glare at him. "So you're afraid of what people will say—you think I'm not? Have you forgotten how my husband died? Did you think it was a simple matter to take his place as Jiangdong Hall's sect leader? Nangong Liu, you know how I've felt about you since we were young!"

"Yes, yes, don't be angry, don't be angry."

"Of course I'm angry! Back then, you only married that bitch Rong Yan so your dead bastard of a father would name you his successor! I… I had no other prospects; I married my shixiong. Now we're finally freed of both of them, yet after we merge our sects, you—you'd make me a *warden*?"

"Liangji…"

"Forget it! Whoever wants that post is welcome to it, but you have to

marry me!” Qi Liangji’s tirade continued. “That son of yours, Nangong Si—he’s out of control, just like that bitch Rong Yan. You really intend to let him inherit the position of sect leader? People can talk about it for as long as they like. One of us is a widow and the other a widower; what’s wrong with us getting married? Whom are we harming? Not only do I intend to marry you; afterward, I’ll bear you ten little gongzi. Nangong Liu, do you want our children, or the little dog that bitch left behind?”

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Chapter 171:
Shizun, Rufeng Sect Has Fallen

NANGONG LIU WAS BACKED into a corner. He could only wheedle, "There there, of course I care for you. But this matter requires careful consideration. Let's do as we agreed. First, as sect leader, you'll announce that Jiangdong Hall will come under the auspices of Rufeng Sect. After the two sects are merged, we'll…"

"I won't!" Qi Liangji exclaimed, the rims of her eyes red. "Back then, I… I trusted you, and what happened? You turned around and married Rong Yan… I won't settle this time! Give me a definite answer. Will you marry me or not?"

Watching him hesitate, she grew even angrier. "Nangong Liu, how long are you going to beat around the bush?" she growled. "I killed my husband with my own hands, all for *us*—but you? Don't you even have the guts to nod?!"

"Ah!" At this point, everyone watching gasped in horror.

Xue Zhengyong was no exception. He murmured to Madam Wang, "She *murdered* Jiangdong Hall's former sect leader?"

Within the space of minutes, Jiangdong Hall, too, had fallen from grace. The previous sect leader was dead, but many of his subordinates remained in the sect, including two of his brothers. They flew at Qi Liangji, holding nothing back.

"*You* killed Dage?!"

"H-how could you! Even if he was a decade older than you, he treated you so well, you—you poisonous woman! Return my brother's life!"

Fighting broke out on one side while the blazing inferno raged on the other. Shocking scenes unfolded from the broken scroll one by one. In the brilliant glow, painfully sordid events never meant to see the light of day were bared before the world. Nor were these affairs limited to Rufeng Sect; nearly all the sects of the upper cultivation realm were implicated. Countless renowned figures and major cultivators, all gathered at Rufeng Sect for the wedding, appeared in the leaping flames. After Jiangdong Hall followed Wubei Temple, Huohuang Pavilion, and Bitan Manor. Even the

lofty, untouchable Kunlun Taxue Palace received this treatment: major scandals involving senior disciples and elders lit up the night sky. Nangong Xu supplemented his own memories with the memories of others that he had collected from far afield, displaying them all starkly before the crowd.

There was even an old record of Nangong Liu scheming with the previous sect leader of Wubei Temple, Master Tianchan.

"Great Master, the Spiritual Mountain Competition is tomorrow. I must come out on top. My father already thinks I'm stupid; if I yield to my younger brother's sword in the competition, I'll really have no future as sect leader."

"Nangong-shizhu needn't panic. Have you mastered all the techniques in the scroll this old monk gave to you before?"

"I have."

Master Tianchan twirled his beard and smiled. "Then you have nothing to worry about. Just focus your efforts on executing the techniques from that scroll, and your little brother won't stand a chance."

Still confused, Nangong Liu replied, "This humble one is slow-witted and begs Master to explain more clearly."

"That cultivational scroll contains secret techniques your brother Nangong Xu himself invented. He diligently poured his blood, sweat, and tears into refining them in order to make a name for himself at the Spiritual Mountain Competition."

"Ah." Nangong Liu was taken aback. "If Xu-di created these techniques, how…how can I use them to defeat him?"

Master Tianchan's lips curved in a small smile. "Nangong Xu is arrogant. After developing these techniques, he shunned his sectmates and holed himself up in a cave to train day and night. Even if he claims himself as the originator of these techniques, who would believe him?"

Nangong Liu stared.

"But you're different, Nangong-shizhu," Master Tianchan continued, serene. "Four of Taxue Palace's elders and I will serve as the judges. As long as we attest that we witnessed you master these techniques, and you insist that you acquired them through your own meticulous study, then it matters not how eloquent your little brother's claims. His reputation will bear the stain of stealing his older brother's cultivational techniques. Once

his name is tarnished and he is criticized by all, he'll never escape his fate. Even if he wins the competition, what use will it be?"

"I see…" Nangong Liu's eyes widened as if he'd suddenly seen the light. He cupped his fist in his hand respectfully. "Many thanks to the Great Master for his guidance! Once this humble one rises to power, I will assuredly pledge an alliance with the Great Master. In the future, Rufeng Sect and Wubei Temple will enjoy centuries of friendship!"

That long scroll tumbled onward, illuminating the night and gouging wounds for everyone to see into all whom Xu Shuanglin loathed, all who'd wronged him. The great blazing images even lured a handful of commoners from around Rufeng Sect, who joined the cultivators in watching these hidden scandals that were like foul lice swarming beneath sumptuous robes.

When the rift to the ghost realm had opened, Xu Shuanglin had said with a brilliant smile, *I'd like to destroy every single one of your hearts*. Only now did they understand what he'd meant. Under the name of Shuanglin Elder, Nangong Xu had been hibernating within Rufeng Sect for years. He hadn't merely planned to destroy Rufeng Sect's seventy-two cities and centuries of prestige. He intended to destroy every person he detested. Everyone who had turned their backs on him, blackened his name, and forced him onto a path of no return, all for their own selfish gain. His elder brother Nangong Liu had been only the first head to roll on these sacrificial grounds of vengeance. Not one among the parade of sect leaders and elders who followed him could escape the fires of judgment. It didn't matter who they were, as long as they had offended Xu Shuanglin.

Standing amidst that endless night pierced by flames, Chu Wanning recalled the young man from Luo Xianxian's memories. That young man, covered in blood, who had grinned as he said, *There was a man from Linyi whose heart died at twenty*. A young man with unparalleled spiritual talent, an exceptional prodigy who'd never been afforded a fair chance, who had been schemed against, conspired against, and pushed away by his own family. The techniques he'd poured his heart into had been stolen, and the people who'd stolen them levied false accusations against him, calling *him* the thief. The kind of absurdity that was…

His heart died at twenty.

When they'd met Xu Shuanglin via his white chess pieces at Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs, he'd said he was a ghost who'd crawled out of hell to demand the blood of the living.

Chu Wanning watched the chaotic scene before him. The sects of the upper cultivation world had fallen into complete disarray. The saying "monkeys scatter when the tree falls" applied to more than just Rufeng Sect. Xu Shuanglin had used the latter half of his life as dry tinder to kindle this fire of vengeance. And he'd succeeded.

A massive explosion rocked Rufeng Sect's seventh city—the shadow city. Purple fire streaked toward the sky, so bright the onlookers closed their eyes against it.

Ye Wangxi's sword-straight brows immediately drew together. "This is bad!"

She had already turned her sword toward the shadow city when Nangong Si grabbed her. Within this brief interval, his haughty features had grown haggard; he seemed on the verge of collapse. Yet still he gripped Ye Wangxi's shoulder tightly and rasped, "Don't go."

"The demonic spirits under the Golden Drum Tower will escape! Rufeng Sect's suppressed thousands of spirits there over the centuries… If they manage to break the seals and come into the world…" Ye Wangxi trailed off, shuddering with fear.

"What can you do if you go?" Nangong Si said.

"I…"

"Ye Wangxi, you've done enough for Rufeng Sect." Gaze distant, Nangong Si raised a hand as if to wipe a speck of mud from Ye Wangxi's cheek. But in the end, he aborted the gesture. "Don't waste your energy," he said. "Securing Golden Drum Tower requires the combined strength of the sect leader and ten elders. To go alone would be a death sentence."

"I know—but still…" Ye Wangxi paused, her expression full of pain. "Even if it's suicide, how can I do nothing? If Golden Drum Tower falls and those spirits descend upon the land, everyone…will blame Rufeng Sect… You…"

"Do you think if the Golden Drum Tower remains standing, Rufeng Sect will escape blame?" Nangong Si laughed, the blood at the corner of his mouth lending a bleakness to his smile. "Don't be stupid. Rufeng Sect is lost. But you need to stay alive, okay? I really…" Nangong Si closed his eyes, his lashes trembling, and his voice sticking in his throat. "I really don't want anyone else to die for this sect… It's not worth it."

Lit by the surging flames, Ye Wangxi stared fearfully at Nangong Si.

She was still considering her reply when she heard the rumble of a tower collapsing from the direction of the shadow city. She turned to see thousands of brilliant streaks of white light flying from the lofty Golden Drum Tower. They split in all directions, vanishing into the fathomless night.

All the color drained from Ye Wangxi's face. "Golden Drum Tower…is falling…"

With a thunderous *boom*, the ground beneath their feet began to split. As those spirits crowded for centuries beneath Golden Drum Tower returned to walk the earth, a blinding beam of bloodred light coalesced to form a colossal fish with a tail like a crimson lotus in bloom. With an earth-shattering roar that shook the leaves on trees a thousand miles away, the huge fish sped toward the East Sea. In an instant, the magnificent tower exploded into a million tile fragments. The giant demon's slipstream bowled over a number of cultivators flying too close to the tower on their swords; they tumbled into the apocalyptic fire and were burned to ash before they could open their mouths to scream.

"What was that?"

"The gun!"

Another listener took offense at this. Clutching their own sword tightly against the force of the gale, they snapped, "What do you mean, *again*? Isn't one monster enough?!"

"Who said *again*? I said, that's the '*gun*'! The fiercest beast from ancient times! Legend has it that Rufeng Sect's first leader, Nangong Changying, made the East Sea surrender that monstrous gun to him, then built Golden Drum Tower to imprison it. Who would've thought… Who would've thought the legend was actually true!"

Although the ferocious beast had escaped, it had yet to fully recover its strength. Wary of cultivators after being trapped beneath Golden Drum Tower for centuries, it fled toward the East Sea with all haste, leaving billowing gusts in its wake. The consequences were disastrous—apocalyptic fire soared scores of feet higher as the winds fanned the flames. Areas previously untouched by the blaze instantly began to burn.

Xue Zhengyong was a veteran of the battlefield. He immediately cried at the top of his lungs, "Run! Everybody *run*!"

Shards of brick rained down around him as he sent the iron fan carrying himself and Madam Wang skimming out of the conflagration.

The remaining cultivators fled in every direction. Some, like Qi Liangji, caught up in a vicious, unrelenting battle with elders from her own sect, were unable to react in time and were swallowed by the flames. Or perhaps they had no desire to do so. Even as the inferno overwhelmed them, their eyes, glinting with hatred, were still riveted on their opponents.

Just like that, they vanished into ash.

Nangong Si leapt onto Naobaijin's back and held out a hand to Ye Wangxi. "Get up here, hurry!" He turned to look at Chu Wanning nearby. "Zongshi—you too—"

"It'll be too heavy; you go ahead."

"But…"

Mo Ran made a decision on the spot. "Go!" he cried to Nangong Si. "I'll carry Shizun out on my sword!"

The great fire was drawing nearer, flames speeding toward them in leaps and bounds. Nangong Si swore under his breath and wrapped his arms around Ye Wangxi to secure her from behind. The two astride the faewolf's back quickly dwindled to nothing in the vast darkness.

Trees toppled one after another. The tangerine grove emitted loud popping noises as it burned, the unexpected sweetness of citrus filling the air. There was no time to waste—Mo Ran summoned his oathbound sword and fled with Chu Wanning toward lands the inferno had yet to reach.

Behind them, Rufeng Sect in all its centuries of glory, the epitome of the elite, privileged, and upper class, suffered the same fate as its soaring colonnades and magnificent grassy fields. Amidst the surging tide of flames, it perished in the course of a single night.

Chapter 172:
Shizun Doesn't Eat Children

THE GALES THE GUN had stirred spread apocalyptic fire over most of Linyi. The cultivators who had come for the wedding fled on their swords in every direction, the merciless flames nipping at their heels. Any cultivator who depleted their spiritual energy lost the race and met their end swallowed by the inferno.

The escaping cultivators overflew many of the villages clustered around Rufeng's lofty cities. These commoners from the upper cultivation realm were struck with horror when they saw the great fire slowly approaching from the direction of Rufeng Sect. The panicking families picked up to flee—but what means did they have to escape this conflagration bearing down like a flow of lava?

"Dad!"

"Daddy—*Daddy*!"

The cries and shouts of the villagers rose as they passed over. Xue Zhengyong and the others expanded their weapons to their maximum sizes, and each pulled aboard a full load of commoners.

Madam Wang murmured a continuous stream of comforting words. "Don't cry, all of you, don't cry. Slide on over and sit in the middle. Be careful, hold on tight to each other, don't fall…"

But the iron fan couldn't be expanded any further, and there were too many in the villages who couldn't be saved. Kneeling at the front, Xue Zhengyong leaned over to grab another wailing child. But as he tried to pull them up, the iron fan shuddered violently, unable to bear the additional weight. He had no choice but to let go and watch helplessly as that tearstained, hopeful face was swiftly flung far behind.

Xue Zhengyong was a man of steely resolve, but he couldn't help howling in grief. "Why? *Why?* Because one man was treated unfairly, he must drag all these innocents to the grave?" He wept, tears rolling down his frank face. "As if this world isn't already enough of a mess? As if there aren't enough people who die in vain…?"

Madam Wang's eyes were also reddened. She cradled a rescued child in each arm. Both children's parents had pushed them onto the iron

fan but had been consumed by the flames before they themselves could climb to safety. The children sobbed in Madam Wang's embrace as she patted their small heads. What comfort could she offer them? She knew not what to say.

She looked behind her. Out of the ten or so cultivators who had been following them, several had disappeared, having succumbed to the fires. Others had set out in a different direction altogether, like Chu Wanning and Mo Ran. She silently prayed for their safety, her eyes filled with tears.

Not far away, Jiang Xi carried the still-unconscious Xue Meng, the fire's glow playing over his graceful features. His beautiful sword was ill-suited to carrying a heavy load and buzzed incessantly beneath his feet. Jiang Xi glared at Xue Meng disdainfully. He'd been tempted to throw this brat off into the flames several times, but when he saw Madam Wang's imploring expression from the iron fan, he gloomily pursed his lips and held him steady.

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Xue Zhengyong was weeping as he tried to pull a younger and lighter child onto the fan. But however dearly he wished for it, his weapon had nothing left to give. He once again let go of a hand he'd grabbed, on the verge of breaking down. Still kneeling, he curled in on himself, the inadequacy of his own strength tearing him apart…

At that precise moment, a rosy light flashed. Jiang Xi waved his hand, radiance shining from his sleeve, and lifted the girl Xue Zhengyong couldn't pick up onto his own sword.

The buzzing sound from the resplendent Xuehuang grew even louder. Short-tempered, Jiang Xi stomped on the blade and snapped, "What're you complaining for? If you've got the balls, you can stop here and wait for the fire to burn you up."

Sure enough, Xuehuang went silent. It sailed ahead with Jiang Xi and the other two passengers without another peep, though the slender sword really did look like it might break under the strain at any moment.

Jiang Xi drew near to Xue Zhengyong and shot him a contemptuous glare. "What's a grown man like you crying about?" he said sharply. "If you can save them, then do it. If you can't, then don't. Why make a scene?"

"Shidi…" murmured Madam Wang.

"Am I wrong?" Jiang Xi sneered. Although he was handsome, the malicious curve of his mouth made him look terribly cold. "If you'd stayed at Guyueye instead of leaving with him, how would you be so feeble now —you can't even ride your own sword. If you weren't sitting on that fan, your heroic savior of a husband would be able to rescue someone else."

Madam Wang seemed stung by these words. She lowered her face and slowly closed her eyes in silence.

Far in the opposite direction, Mo Ran had also expanded his sword to an enormous size. In addition to Chu Wanning, it now carried a full load of commoners from the upper cultivation realm.

The refugees shivered and sniffled, watching blankly as their homes were swallowed by the sea of fire and burned to the ground. They closed their eyes and broke down in mournful sobs, their tears reflecting the flames.

Mo Ran remained silent in this grave atmosphere. Unlike Xue

Zhengyong, he hadn't sought out pointless struggles. He knew he couldn't carry any more, so he no longer looked down at the wailing, screaming villagers rushing by beneath him. His brow furrowed slightly. "The coast is up ahead. Shizun, where should we go?"

"Can you make it to Flying Flower Isle?"

Flying Flower Isle was the island closest to Linyi in the upper cultivation realm. Mo Ran nodded. "I'll make it. But I'm not too familiar with the East Sea, so I'll need to focus on navigating. Shizun, keep an eye on everyone and make sure they stay awake. It's crowded up here; if someone falls asleep, they might slip overboard."

"Okay," Chu Wanning agreed.

Mo Ran pressed ahead for more than two hours. As dawn glimmered pale on the horizon and the sun emerged in the east, they broke through the clouds and saw a modest ring-shaped island surrounded by sparkling, jade-green waters.

At last, they'd arrived at Flying Flower Isle.

Although this island fell under the aegis of Rufeng Sect, it was remote and sparsely populated. Most of the residents were independent fishermen who lived off the sea, and there was only one family of any wealth. The islanders had anxiously spotted the huge fire engulfing Rufeng Sect as a bloody glow on the horizon across the raging surf. No one knew what had happened; many watched from their doorsteps, too afraid to sleep for fear that flames would soon blanket their own skies.

By daybreak, that strange phenomenon hadn't reached their island—instead, a vast dark sword carrying a crowd of people touched down on a shoal. At its helm was a tall and dashing young man, his cheeks stained with streaks of dried blood as if he had endured a fierce battle.

Flying Flower Isle had no cultivators, and its leaders were all ordinary people. Everyone was frightened by the sight—they didn't know if this man was friend or foe, or why he had come.

"Aiya, why are their faces all sooty…" one of the villagers muttered, peering at the assorted crowd behind Mo Ran. "Must've come out of that big fire… Did they fly here from Linyi?"

A broad-shouldered fisherman gathered his courage and approached the strangers. "Are… Are you all from Rufeng Sect?"

"Sisheng Peak." Mo Ran passed the child in his arms to

Chu Wanning. The toddler was too young to stay awake through the night, so Mo Ran had carried him in his arms the whole way to ensure he wouldn't be crowded off the sword. "There was some trouble at Rufeng Sect, and these…are all residents of Linyi. The apocalyptic fire was too powerful, and the sword could only carry so many—I couldn't save many of them, I…"

Mo Ran had babbled out half this explanation before he looked up and saw the fisherman's bewildered expression. He realized he was speaking too quickly. How would the residents of Flying Flower Isle know anything about apocalyptic fire or the limitations of sword-riding techniques? He pressed his lips together, then said gently, "I'm sorry, I'll explain the details later." He turned toward the exhausted, defeated crowd behind him. "Could you first get them some food and water?"

One of the orphaned children had come close, helpless with panic. He slowly nudged Mo Ran's leg and reached up, tugging on the corner of his robe with a tiny hand. Mo Ran looked down and patted him on the head. "I'm truly sorry for the inconvenience," he said to the fisherman.

Most of the islanders were kindhearted, and tea and food were quickly brought over. Mo Ran briefly summarized the story. They gaped in astonishment, staring blankly at the unbroken line of firelight on the horizon.

"Rufeng Sect…burned down?" someone said incredulously.

"Nangong-zhangmen is dead?"

"He isn't dead—he was given a lingchi fruit and taken away," said Mo Ran.

"What's a lingchi fruit?"

"That's a…"

Chu Wanning watched from the sidelines as Mo Ran patiently explained to the fishermen. He didn't step forward himself. He was perfectly aware that he looked uncaring by nature, his features chilled as if by frost. It would be far better to leave Mo Ran to handle the locals.

The child he held had begun to stir. On waking to find himself in the arms of this cold-looking stranger, he started and began to wail. Gone was all the docility he'd shown in Mo Ran's arms.

Chu Wanning glanced over at Mo Ran. He was still engrossed in conversation with the locals, leaving Chu Wanning to fend for himself.

Out of habit, he put on a stern expression and told the child, “Don’t cry.”

The child’s wails rose in pitch. “Daddy, Mommy…” he cried over and over. “I want my daddy; I want my mommy.”

“Don’t cry.” Chu Wanning stiffly tried to comfort him. “You—don’t cry.”

“Wahhh! Mommy… Mommy…”

With one hand occupied holding the child, Chu Wanning lifted his other to pat him on the head. The child jerked back, avoiding his touch. His face was bright red, covered in tears and snot as he wailed, “I want my mommy, I want my daddy. I wanna go home…”

Chu Wanning was at his wits’ end. He had never been in a position to comfort a child before and had no clue what to say. He racked his brain for ways to soothe the boy. But as he sank into thought, a crease formed between his brows, giving him the air of a sword forged of steel, dark and cold as ice. The miserably howling child happened to glimpse Chu Wanning’s expression as he kicked and struggled. So terrifying was the sight that he instantly choked on his sobs, unable to make another sound. He bit his lip, great, round tears rolling from his eyes like a broken string of pearls.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning remembered something. He untied his qiankun pouch with his free hand and pulled out a sticky rice candy. After peeling off the paper wrapper, he handed it to the child.

The child hiccupped. Eyes swimming with tears, he looked silently at Chu Wanning, then at the candy in his hand. Like most children, his mother had raised him on folktales. No few featured scary cultivators who snatched away disobedient children to feed them sleeping potions before refining them into pills of immortality. The child silently held back his tears and stared at Chu Wanning in terror.

Chu Wanning stared blankly back, still holding up the sticky rice candy. He didn’t get it. His phoenix eyes were slightly upturned, their ends long and slender. Such eyes were beautiful, but they appeared haughty and calculating when he wasn’t smiling. Even with a slight smile, his eyes imparted the wildness of a thorny rose, prickly and arrogant. But most wouldn’t appreciate such arrogance. Chu Wanning’s face was handsome, but strangers naturally didn’t find it likable, and especially not strange children.

“Eat this.” Chu Wanning had watched Mo Ran produce candy to

pacify several children while they were on the sword. He was only following his example—he had no idea why this candy was unacceptable.

The child pressed his lips closed. He hesitated, trembling, then slowly shook his head. He didn't want to be refined into immortality pills…

"Don't you…" Before Chu Wanning could say more, the child broke down sobbing in fright, his cries so heartrending that everyone around them looked over. Chu Wanning hadn't time to react. Still holding up the sticky rice candy, he murmured, "…like sweets?"

Between the sounds of his own sobs, the child misheard Chu Wanning's tentative question as *Don't you look sweet?* In his little brain, he had come to the definitive conclusion that this cultivator wanted to refine him into pills—into very sweet pills of immortality, no less. He was so panicked he began bawling hysterically at the top of his lungs.

Chu Wanning stood stiff as a board.

Chapter 173:
Shizun, Someone Wants to Chase Us Away

CHU WANNING FELT LIKE he was caught holding a hot potato. He had no idea what to do. As more and more eyes turned in his direction, his ears flushed red with embarrassment.

At that moment, a pair of hands reached out to take the child from his arms. Chu Wanning let out a breath of relief and turned. “Mo Ran?”

“Mn.” Mo Ran shifted the child to the crook of one arm. With his free hand, he ruffled Chu Wanning’s hair. His expression was solemn, his features weighed down faintly with melancholy after the tragedies in Linyi. Still, he made an effort to lift the corners of his lips in front of Chu Wanning, not wishing to show him an unhappy expression. His half-smile wasn’t so gallant as usual, but it radiated an indescribable warmth.

“All settled with the islanders?”

“Mn, all settled.”

“The fire in Linyi probably won’t burn itself out for a few days. We should stay on Flying Flower Isle for now. But there aren’t many houses on the island, and we’ve brought so many people…”

“I’ve asked the village elder. He said there will be room if we double up.”

Mo Ran had always been good at handling such things. He had a knack for getting on well with others, and as for his looks… Chu Wanning remembered how the girls in Yuliang Village had eyed Mo Ran when they’d helped with the rice harvest. Without a doubt, Mo Ran was vastly more likable than he. Chu Wanning stood in silent thought for a while, unable to identify what he was feeling. He nodded. “You’ve worked hard.”

“No need for that with me.” Mo Ran took one look at the candy, still in Chu Wanning’s hand, and understood what had happened. With a laugh, he turned to comfort the oblivious child in his arms. “Hey you, why are you crying?”

“I want Mommy… I want Daddy…”

The child was so young he still walked unsteadily, yet he’d already lost both parents forever to the sea of flames. Mo Ran’s heart ached as he looked at the boy. He pressed his forehead to the child’s and consoled him

softly, “Your mom and dad…have some things to take care of. It’ll be a few days before they can come stay with you. Be a good boy now, so they’ll be happy when they see you…” The child gradually calmed as Mo Ran held and soothed him. Although he still sniffled from time to time, he’d stopped screaming and wailing.

Still holding the candy, Chu Wanning stood to the side and watched Mo Ran lower his head toward the tearful child. His profile was beautiful, its contours strong and crisp. Were he a watercolor painting, his brushstrokes would be vigorous and masterful, an extraordinary composition that effortlessly produced a face without equal. His features were cleanly defined, but his lashes and the eyes that peered through them were soft, like delicate leaves unfurling in spring.

Chu Wanning’s mind began to wander.

When Mo Ran leaned over to take the candy at his fingertips with his mouth, Chu Wanning jerked back in surprise, his eyes widening. “What are you *doing?”*

The sticky rice candy was small. Mo Ran’s lips had naturally brushed against Chu Wanning’s fingers when he bit into the candy. In fact, the warm, wet tip of his tongue had even flicked the pads of Chu Wanning’s fingertips by accident. Chu Wanning’s whole body went numb. This tiny, fleeting intimacy sent an itch scuttling down his spine, like a tender sprout breaking from its seed and pushing the impassive soil out of the way, pressing against the suffocating earth until it became soft and malleable…

Mo Ran grinned at him with the candy between his lips, and then turned to wink at the child. He tossed the candy up to catch it in his mouth, his throat bobbing as he did. “See, it’s not some scary medicine,” he said to the boy. “It’s only sweets.”

Chu Wanning was speechless. Lost in thought, he hadn’t been paying attention to Mo Ran’s murmured conversation with the boy. Only now did he look back toward the child, who was staring at Mo Ran with timid, earnest eyes. “Ah, it’s really candy…” he finally said in a tiny, astonished voice.

“Yup.” Mo Ran smiled. “This cultivator-gege is such a good person, how could he possibly kidnap you and make you into pills?”

Chu Wanning thought it better not to respond.

The sky was brightening by the time Mo Ran had settled all the refugees. After the shocking occurrences of the night before, he wasn't sleepy at all. He ventured down to the shore of Flying Flower Isle by himself. The tide had receded in the morning, revealing shoals that couldn't be seen in the darkness.

Now that he was alone, his worries came rushing to the surface, clouding his thoughts in a haze he couldn't dispel. He slipped off his shoes and walked slowly along the shoreline, leaving two crooked trails in the wet sand.

He found many things about Xu Shuanglin inexplicable. For instance, why did he refuse to wear shoes in the dead of winter, walking everywhere barefoot instead?

Mo Ran had hidden much of his past, and people had rarely treated him with kindness. Perhaps that was why he felt he understood why Xu Shuanglin had put every effort into destroying Rufeng Sect and Jiangdong Hall, throwing the entire upper cultivation realm into chaos. The most painful thing in the world wasn't being beaten down or pushed aside. On the contrary—the most painful thing was to be betrayed by those closest to you. It was to be someone who had been innocent of wrongdoing, someone with a heart bursting with passion, who strove to become a zongshi of his generation, who then had everyone at the foremost competition in the cultivation world pointing at him, saying he'd stolen his techniques from his older brother—the techniques he'd poured his heart and soul into… He had been buried under this ridicule and contempt, never to rise again.

After the present calamity passed, the cultivation world would inevitably have to deal with how the cards had been reshuffled. The sects that had suffered grievous injuries, whether to their reputations or their members, would all think, *Xu Shuanglin is truly a madman*. Perhaps only Mo Weiyu, who had once himself been a beastly, bloodthirsty murderer, would stroll alone along a peaceful, unbroken stretch of shore and consider: just what kind of person was Xu Shuanglin?

Had that madman ever exhausted himself training in the tangerine grove when he was young and full of vigor? Had he returned after nightfall, weary and satisfied, with a sweet tangerine tucked into his sleeve for his lazy brother, never knowing that this useless brother's silver tongue would later make him a pariah in the world of cultivation?

Had that madman ever been engrossed in reading cultivation scrolls,

earnestly loading his brush with ink to pen some naïve opinion? Had he bitten the brush's handle in dissatisfaction, sinking into deep thought, never knowing that no matter how hard he worked, what awaited him was a ruined reputation, his hopes forever extinguished?

Mo Ran closed his eyes. The sea breeze washed over his face, the dawn light gilding his lashes. He remembered Xu Shuanglin's courtyard, Farewell to Three Lifetimes. "One sip of Mengpo's soup bids farewell to three lifetimes of memories." Could Xu Shuanglin have given his home such a name on a mere whim?

There was also the question of what had happened in Mo Ran's previous lifetime. Back then, Xu Shuanglin had similarly sequestered himself within Rufeng Sect, and his goals ought to have been no different than they were in this one. But in that life, he had died amidst the beacon fires to save Ye Wangxi…

Ye Wangxi. Xu Shuanglin had given her this name, *Wangxi*—to forget the past. But what was he trying to forget? Had he once tried to forget those unjust, unfair times, to forget the hatred and glory of the past, to forget each and every repulsive face in his memory?

And the corpse that Xu Shuanglin had gone to such great lengths to drag out of the Infinite Hells—Luo Fenghua's corpse. What did he need this corpse for? In the illusion, Xu Shuanglin had told Nangong Liu that the curse on the ring could be broken by obtaining the caster's spiritual core. But it seemed, considering the outcome, that Xu Shuanglin hadn't intended to help Nangong Liu get rid of the curse at all.

The Heavenly Rift, the Zhenlong Chess Formation, Rebirth… And there was the hand that had reached out of the rift at the end of those events. Mo Ran vaguely felt that something wasn't right. His brows knitted tighter as he mulled it over.

All of a sudden, his eyes flew open. He remembered—

Years ago, by Jincheng Lake, the ancient dragon Wangyue had said before his death, *That mysterious person used the Heart-Pluck Willow's power in Jincheng Lake to practice two secret techniques—the first was Rebirth, and the second was the Zhenlong Chess Formation.*

There had been no mention of the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death. If Wangyue was to be believed, Xu Shuanglin only cared about learning the techniques of Rebirth and the Zhenlong Chess Formation. The benefits of the latter were obvious—controlling chess pieces would make

executing his schemes much easier.

But what about Rebirth? Whom did he want to bring back to life?

After some thought, Mo Ran felt there were two options: Rong Yan and Luo Fenghua. Xu Shuanglin had implied that Rong Yan actually favored him in love but had turned her back on Xu Shuanglin for reasons unknown and ultimately married his brother.

But upon further consideration, Mo Ran concluded that she couldn't be the one. If Xu Shuanglin were really in love with Rong Yan such that he'd do anything to revive her, why would he have murdered her only son in the previous lifetime? Besides, he had spent years by Nangong Liu's side disguised as Shuanglin Elder. If he'd wanted to use the Rebirth technique for the sake of Rong Yan, why did he not simply prevent her from being sacrificed at Jincheng Lake in the first place?

So it wasn't Rong Yan.

Mo Ran turned to gaze at the ocean dyed red by the rising sun, its crashing waves surging without pause. Following the sun's eastern ascent, the tide swelled, eating up the sand as Mo Ran watched. Framed between heaven and earth was a vision of golden splendor.

It had to be Luo Fenghua. Mo Ran was certain of it. The person Nangong Xu wanted to revive was Luo Fenghua.

Rufeng Sect's affairs were the opposite of simple, no matter how they appeared on the surface. They were much like the rise and fall of the sea—the broken cowries and the starfish with their brilliant, dangerous colors all disappeared beneath the churning waves of dawn.

As the tide rolled in, the waves swept away the pebbles and spread over the shoal he was walking on. Feeling a sudden chill beneath his soles, Mo Ran looked down and saw that the surf had risen to beat against the tops of his feet. As he wiggled his shapely toes, he felt a little cold, and turned to head back up the beach for his shoes. But as soon as he looked back, he saw that Chu Wanning had walked over to join him. Set against a sky full of rosy clouds, he bore a mild expression and carried in one hand the shoes and socks Mo Ran had tossed upon the sand. He handed Mo Ran his shoes. "It's too cold to be walking around barefoot."

Mo Ran followed him to the top of a dune and lowered himself down next to some craggy boulders on the shore. He brushed the sand from his feet and put his shoes back on. Suddenly, he felt rather comforted. Even if he never received the kind of love he wanted from Chu Wanning

in this lifetime, Chu Wanning was still the best shizun in the world—he cared for Mo Ran and looked after him. When Chu Wanning saw him walking barefoot, he worried Mo Ran would catch cold.

"What do you make of the affair at Rufeng Sect?" Chu Wanning asked.

"It's more complicated than it looks."

"I agree." Chu Wanning's brow had hardly smoothed once since the events of last night. Despite the calm of the moment, his forehead still creased with worry. Seeing that Mo Ran had put on his socks and shoes, he turned again toward the vast ocean.

The sun burnished the water's surface a brilliant red-gold. It was hard to tell where the sunrise ended and the distant conflagration in Linyi began.

"It'll be difficult to track Xu Shuanglin through the space rift," said Chu Wanning. "If he hides and covers his trail well, a decade could pass before we catch sight of him again."

Mo Ran shook his head. "He won't wait a decade. After he recovers his strength, he'll definitely make his move."

"What makes you think so?"

Mo Ran explained his theory, then added, "The corpse of Luo Fenghua we saw isn't real flesh and blood—it's merely an artificial body reconstructed in the Infinite Hells. After it exits the ghost realm, it'll rot quickly without a supply of yin energy. I'm guessing he'll show himself again within a year, even if he's not completely prepared."

Chu Wanning didn't reply. He had always been exceedingly cautious in both thought and action. Unlike Mo Ran, it wasn't his way to make bold conjectures regarding something so amorphous. But as he listened, he felt perhaps there was no harm in doing some guesswork. "What about that hand?" Chu Wanning asked. "What do you think about the hand that pulled Nangong Xu away?"

Mo Ran shook his head again. "I'm not well-read on the first forbidden technique, so it's hard to say. I don't know."

These words were untrue. Even if Mo Ran no longer wanted to lie to Chu Wanning, there remained some things he simply couldn't say—that he didn't dare to say. For as long as he could remember, the days of peace he had been afforded were so pitifully few—likely totaling less than a year

over the course of two lifetimes. If someone who had spent decades adrift was suddenly sat before a bonfire with a pot of hot tea, how could he bear to step away? How could he bear to shatter this sweet dream with his own hands?

So he could only say, *I don't know.*

But his heart stirred restlessly. Even if they knew whose hand it was, that wouldn't solve the mystery. Why hadn't the past life's Xu Shuanglin also gathered five elemental spiritual essences and slaughtered all who opposed him? One could assume, from how things played out, that Xu Shuanglin wouldn't have figured out how to resurrect Luo Fenghua at all unless someone who was himself reborn had enticed him, led him astray…

Years ago at Jincheng Lake, Xu Shuanglin's white chess piece had said to Chu Wanning, *If you think that I'm the only one in this world who knows the three forbidden techniques, then I'm afraid you won't have much longer to live.*

Mo Ran reasoned that Xu Shuanglin must know someone who had come to this world from another. At the same time, he was fairly certain Xu Shuanglin didn't know that Mo Ran himself had been reborn. Otherwise, why hadn't he revealed Mo Ran's origins when they'd clashed at Rufeng Sect? He would've needed only capture some of Mo Ran's memories in the scroll and expose them in the inferno. No amount of Chu Wanning's goodwill could endure that; he'd probably disown Mo Ran as his disciple on the spot. And then it would all be over for Mo Weiyu; he would never rise from such a fall again.

Why hadn't Xu Shuanglin done this? There were two possibilities. One: because he wasn't able to, for one reason or another. Two: because he didn't know Mo Ran's secrets.

In any case, there was no action Mo Ran could take—he didn't have enough information. If his opponent covered their tracks carefully, Mo Ran could only stand and wait for that gleaming, cold knife to come at his back at any moment.

Mo Ran pursed his lips and lowered his thick lashes with a slight flutter. There was only so much he could do. In the past life, consumed by selfish vengeance, he had committed too many outrageous deeds. In this life, he wanted to try his best to live each day well no matter the outcome, to repay the people to whom he owed debts, and to protect his shizun, Shi Mei, Xue Meng, and all of Sisheng Peak. He wanted to try his best to hold

onto this brief warmth he'd never before experienced.

As Mo Ran was lost in thought, a fisherman rushed over. "Esteemed cultivators, bad news!" he cried.

Startled, Mo Ran sprang off one hand and leapt to his feet. "What happened?"

"The head of our island's merchant family just returned this morning from being out at sea for several days. Wh-when the village elder explained the situation, she was awfully unhappy with how he'd handled it. She threw a fit and said she wouldn't let the children and elderly stay in the vacant rooms. She's already kicked them out—everyone you brought i-is standing outside."

The fisherman was a gentle soul; as he spoke, his eyes grew teary. "Those poor people—it's such a cold day, and she's not even willing to spare a coat or a blanket… The merchant also said…"

Chu Wanning also stood, his expression dark. "What else did she say?"

"She also said that…since those people from Linyi ate Flying Flower Isle's rations and drank Flying Flower Isle's water, she…she's going to charge them for every last copper, and if they can't afford it, then…then she'll round them up and keep them on Flying Flower Isle…as slaves…"

Before he'd finished, Chu Wanning was storming off toward the center of the island in a whirl of pale blue robes.

Chapter 174:
Shizun's Brocade Pouch

FLYING FLOWER ISLE might have been poor, but its wealthiest merchant had clearly enjoyed some success and lived in ostentatious luxury. The woman was attired in a loose satin robe spangled all over with a golden bat motif, which she wore under a coat made of top-grade snow silk from Kunlun Taxue Palace. Her long, gray-streaked hair was pulled sleekly back and adorned with exquisite hairpins inlaid with kingfisher feathers and flowers made of strung-together pearls. Her eyebrows were drawn in using opulent pigment from conch shells, her skin was powdered and oiled, and her lips were daubed with crimson. A delicate strand of pearls encircled her neck, and a pair of gleaming gold earrings, set with rubies the size of pigeon's eggs, swung ponderously from her earlobes.

She was over fifty at a glance, her youth long faded—an impression reinforced by her rather stout figure and deeply lined face. With some tasteful styling she would have looked well enough, but she clearly thought her beauty proportional to the number of luxurious items she wore. Consequently, beneath this pile of jewels, she resembled nothing so much as a miserly old turtle garnished with red chilis and green onions.

This cunning merchant owned a full half of the land on the small Flying Flower Isle. Even the village elder didn't dare say a word against her. As the sun climbed in the sky, she strolled into the public square. A redwood taishi chair carved with bats and deer had already been set out for her. She took a seat and studied the refugees from Linyi.

"What were you thinking?" She raised heavy-lidded eyes to shoot a calculating glance at the village elder. "They haven't paid a single copper, yet you've given them rooms? And there's the matter of the food—how much have they eaten?"

"Not much… It was only leftovers from the villagers, things they couldn't finish," the village elder mumbled.

The merchant snorted prissily. "You still ought to charge for it. Was this rice and wheat not grown on *my* land? Seeing as the harvest was poor this year, I provided every family with ten catties of barley flour and a jar of oil from my own storehouse. Now, I don't mind feeding you, we're all islanders here—but surely you'd think twice before giving away Third

Lady Sun's grain to these refugees from Linyi?"

"Third Lady is correct, of course," the village elder smiled. "But look, don't you feel pity for these little girls and old men out here in the cold? You're a kind soul, so why not let it go?"

The merchant opened her beady eyes wide. "Let it go? How could I? Money makes the world go round, you know."

The village elder was rendered speechless.

"How much did each family give them to eat?" the merchant asked. "I've asked you to tally the amount. Are you done yet?"

The village elder replied helplessly, "Yes, we've counted everything." He held out a small booklet for the merchant, Third Lady Sun. With a raucous jangle, Third Lady Sun raised her hand; she sported nine colorful bracelets on her right wrist alone. Gold, silver, and jade bangles inlaid with assorted gemstones covered nearly half her forearm.

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“Hmph.” She leafed lazily through the booklet, then closed it. After making a few quick calculations on her fingers, she pronounced, “Such gluttons. All of you must have been born in the year of the pig. You’ve wolfed down twenty-six of the island’s mantou—our mantou are quite large, so ninety silver’s more than reasonable. You drank half a vat of fresh water, which I brought over from Linyi myself. I bought each vat for three gold, so with the transportation cost included, I’ll sell them to you for four gold each—that’s two gold for half. So that’ll be two gold, ninety silver in total. One more thing. Zhang-jie.”

The kindly-looking woman whom she had addressed jumped and looked up. “Ah, Third Lady.”

Third Lady Sun smiled. “The mantou you make are so delicious because you add lard to the dough. That must also be accounted for.”

“Um… I only used a tiny dab of lard for ten mantou. How would I account for such a small amount?”

“What’s so hard about that? Ten mantou, a dab of lard—I’ll charge one copper coin for the lot, that’s very fair.”

The other woman stared silently.

“So that’s two gold, ninety silver, and one copper all together,” said Third Lady Sun. “Plus, you’re all sleeping in rooms on my land. The rooms might not be mine, but the land most assuredly is. You slept for an hour, so that’ll be seventy coppers per person.” She turned to the attendant next to her. “How many refugees are there here?”

“Third Lady, there are forty-nine in total.”

“That’s not right—weren’t there fifty-one before? Where are the other two?”

Before her words had faded, she heard a low voice answer, “Right here.”

Although Chu Wanning wore robes of silvery-blue instead of his customary white, he looked as frostily imposing as ever. His elegant phoenix eyes were bright and clear, his pupils haughty and cold as an unsheathed dagger.

Third Lady Sun was a commoner, but cultivators didn’t frighten her. She had been a businesswoman for most of her life, fussing over and haggling for every coin. But all her operations were aboveboard, and she had always steered clear of evildoers. She said evenly, “I see you’re a

cultivator, so it's no wonder you don't need to sleep. You're the one who rescued these people and brought them here, right? You've come just in time—hurry up and hand over the money."

"Third Lady, these two aren't from Rufeng Sect," the village elder said in a low voice. "They're cultivators from Sisheng Peak, you needn't be so…"

"I don't care what sect they're from—I answer to coin, not people."

Chu Wanning glanced at the shivering refugees huddled together in the cold. With a wave of his hand, he brought down a red-gold barrier to keep out the chill. Then he turned. "How much are you asking?"

"Two gold, ninety-three silver, and four-hundred-thirty copper."

Loathsome Third Lady Sun might be, but they had nowhere else to go. Chu Wanning understood that if he crossed her, the consequences would fall not on him but on those he'd brought here. Face sullen, he fished his money bag from his qiankun pouch and tossed it to her.

"There's about eighty gold in there." Most of his money was still with Xue Zhengyong; he didn't have much on him at all. "We'll stay for seven days or so. See if that's enough."

"It's not."

Third Lady Sun would never lift a finger herself. She summarily passed the bag to her assistant to count the money. "Eighty gold will cover your stay for three days at most, and I haven't even accounted for the cost of food."

"*You*—!"

"If Xianjun isn't convinced, allow me to show you an itemized bill. A businesswoman knows money—we can go through it line by line if you like."

By then, Mo Ran had hurried over. He didn't have much money on him either. With both their finances pooled, they barely had enough to cover four days of food and lodging for fifty-one people.

Third Lady Sun took the coins and drew her vivid red lips up into a smile. "You can stay for four days. After that, I don't care whether the inferno's gone out—if you don't have the money, you need to go."

In the interest of reducing their expenses, Chu Wanning skipped

dinner that night. He cast a messenger haitang over the sea in an attempt to contact Xue Zhengyong, then returned to the little cottage he'd been assigned.

The dwelling was even cruder than the one he'd stayed in during the harvest at Yuliang Village. Because there wasn't much vacant housing on the island, the refugees were all crammed together. Chu Wanning wasn't accustomed to sharing a room with strangers, so he'd doubled up with Mo Ran. The humble cottage's candle had been lit, but Mo Ran wasn't inside—where he had gone off to, Chu Wanning didn't know.

Chu Wanning shrugged off his outer robe. It was a luxurious garment to be sure, but the material really wasn't any finer than the everyday white he favored, and it was by now stained with blood and ash from the apocalyptic fire. He had filled a wooden bucket with hot water and was about to start washing when the door creaked.

Chu Wanning looked up at Mo Ran. "Where'd you go? It's late."

Mo Ran stepped into the room with a woven bamboo food box tucked into his robe to protect against the chill wind. He met Chu Wanning's gaze, the tip of his nose red from the cold, and grinned. "I went to Third Lady's manor to beg for food."

Chu Wanning stared at him. "You went to *beg* for food?"

"Just kidding," Mo Ran said. "But I did bring some dinner."

"What is it?"

"Mantou." Mo Ran looked apologetic. "And a bowl of fish soup, and red-braised pork—no dessert, unfortunately. That Third Lady Sun was staring me down and all the villagers are scared of her, so no one dared give me more. I went to her manor and traded my silver dagger for this."

Chu Wanning frowned. "That woman is heartless. I remember that dagger—there's a spiritual stone set in the hilt. How did you get so little for it?"

"It wasn't just this. I haggled for fifty-one meals, one for everyone. I watched the kitchen send them out," Mo Ran said with a smile. "So don't worry about the others, Shizun—just eat up."

Chu Wanning really *was* quite hungry. He sat at the table and applied himself to the hot fish soup before nibbling on the mantou and braised pork. Third Lady Sun was a stingy woman, so the meat was both meager and greasy, not at all to Chu Wanning's taste. But the steamed bun

dipped in soup wasn't bad at all. After he finished one, he started on his second.

Mo Ran glanced at the steaming bucket of water. "Shizun, you're doing laundry?" he asked.

"Mn."

"If it's just your outer robe, I can wash it for you."

"There's no need, I can do it myself."

"It's fine. I wanted to do my laundry anyway, so this is perfect," said Mo Ran.

He stepped over to the bed to grab the clothes he'd changed out of earlier and hauled the wooden bucket outside. As he looked up at the bright moon in the courtyard, Mo Ran wondered how Xue Meng, his uncle, and the rest were doing, and where Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si were now. He gazed out to sea, toward the great inferno still surging like a bloody tide, smoke scorching the heavens.

He wondered about Song Qiutong…and also about that other person. The one for whom he harbored such bone-deep hatred that he'd slaughtered every soul in Rufeng Sect in the past life. Both had probably lost their lives to the sea of flames.

Mo Ran heaved a sigh and set the thought aside. He put down the wooden bucket, added some cold water from the cistern, and rolled up his sleeves to wash the clothes.

When it came to assembling automatons or writing scrolls, Chu Wanning was thorough and methodical to a fault. But it all went to shambles as soon as he attempted such domestic tasks as laundry or cooking. For instance, Mo Ran always checked his own pockets and qiankun pouch before soaking his clothes to ensure nothing important got wet. But Chu Wanning often forgot this mundane step. Mo Ran mutely fished item after random item out of Chu Wanning's robes.

What *was* all this? A haitang handkerchief. Okay, fairly normal. An assortment of medicines. Also reasonable. A handful of candy…

Mo Ran was at a loss. Upon closer inspection, he realized they were the milk candies he'd given Chu Wanning back in Yuliang Village. How hadn't he finished them yet?

He continued rummaging. A second later, Mo Ran flinched. An Exploding Talisman? His face went ashen with terror as he lifted the damp

paper talisman out of the water. How careless could Chu Wanning *be*? He'd just stuck this Exploding Talisman in his pocket without any safeguard? Even if the chances of it catching fire and self-detonating were slim, it was still appallingly risky. Was this his idea of a joke?

Mo Ran frowned and hurriedly sifted through Chu Wanning's clothes again. After extracting all the Exploding Talismans, Freezing Talismans, and Soul-Soothing Talismans, he discovered that Chu Wanning had even left behind the Rising Dragon Talisman, with that tiny dragon drawing. If he hadn't checked, these paper talismans would've had a nice long soak, and most of them would've been ruined. Seriously, what was he to do with this man… Mo Ran shook his head in exasperation and resolved never again to allow his shizun to do his own laundry.

Just then, a small object, the soft white of lotus root, slipped from an inner pocket. Distracted, Mo Ran assumed it was yet another spiritual talisman. He picked it up and glanced at it briefly.

That glance was enough to stop him in his tracks. What he held was an old brocade pouch embroidered with flowers of the silk tree, their once-brilliant petals dimmed with age. Mo Ran felt at once incredulous and bemused; this object seemed vaguely familiar. He must have seen it somewhere before, long enough ago that he couldn't immediately recall where or when.

As Mo Ran rubbed the little brocade pouch, dark eyebrows knitting together, light and shadow chased each other through his eyes. Memories flitted past as he sought those blooming flowers amidst the rushing tides of time. The fine fabric, slightly cool against his fingers, had faded over the course of the years. He peered at it closely as he turned it over in his hand, but the memory eluded him.

Fearing something dangerous lurked inside—another Exploding Talisman, perhaps—he opened the pouch to take a look.

He was struck dumb by what he saw.

It was a lock of hair. No—upon closer examination, it was *two* locks of hair, tied and coiled together, inextricably linked. Despite the passage of time, they had managed to remain intertwined, keeping each other company. What looked like a singular piece was actually two black locks, long loath to part.

"Hair?" Mo Ran's heart fluttered as realization dawned. "A brocade pouch…" he muttered. "A brocade pouch, with silk-tree flowers…"

Suddenly he remembered. The memory burst to life like fire in his heart, setting his whole chest aflame. His eyes flew wide in astonishment.

The ghost mistress.

He remembered.

The golden boys and jade maidens from Butterfly Town, sharing a cup of wine, the mass ceremony, cutting their hair in oath, entwining their hair in union—he remembered…

Henceforth two souls shall be united, through heaven or hell never to part.

He…remembered.

He remembered!

Before Butterfly Town's ghost mistress, he and Chu Wanning were married in the ghost ceremony. The golden boys and jade maidens had cut from each a lock of hair and placed them together in a silk-tree flower brocade pouch, which Chu Wanning had accepted. This right here was that very brocade pouch.

"But…how?" Mo Ran's ears rang, his heart pounded. He was mystified. "How could this be…"

He clutched the brocade pouch, his hand trembling minutely. An unsettled light leapt within his eyes, flashing between amazement, shock, disbelief, confusion, ecstasy—even sorrow.

Shizun… Chu Wanning… Why—why would he… *Why* would he have kept this?

Chapter 175:
Shizun, Do You Like Me?

CHU WANNING WAS STARTING in on the last mantou when the door swung open behind him. Mo Ran entered, carrying a pile of objects that he placed on the bed.

"Shizun, there were some talismans and other things you didn't take out of your outer robe. I'll put them here for you," Mo Ran said. Without looking up, he turned and left again.

Truth be told, he really didn't have the courage to ask Chu Wanning about the brocade pouch. No matter Chu Wanning's response, he couldn't imagine such a conversation would be anything but unbearably awkward. And this was to say nothing of Chu Wanning's thin face and Mo Ran's own clumsy way with words. What was he to do if he put his foot in his mouth and upset Chu Wanning?

Mo Ran pursed his lips. His dark eyes glinted and flashed, but his thoughts were scattered and confused. Like a bolt from the blue, an unspeakably outrageous idea popped into his head.

Could it be that Chu Wanning…actually *liked* him?

Shocked by the sheer audacity of this fancy, Mo Ran rapidly shook his head. "No way, no way…" he mumbled.

Here was a perfect illustration of the inability to see the forest for the trees—Mo Ran was far too deep in the woods. Had this brocade pouch belonged to someone Mo Ran didn't care for at all, a random female cultivator for example, he would've divined her feelings in an instant. Who would keep a brocade pouch with a lock of another's hair entwined with their own—and for so many years—unless they liked them? In principle, it was a very straightforward scenario. But because Chu Wanning was involved, Mo Ran doubted himself at every turn.

People were like this—the more they cared for someone, the more prone their imagination was to run wild. Normally intelligent people would become fools and have no idea what to do with themselves. A single glance from the object of their affection would send them into deep obsession for a day or more, and a moment's silence would prompt them to embark on a painstaking investigation into the meaning hidden within. Mo Ran would compulsively overthink the simplest of situations, carefully

tasting each and every detail in search of the most elusive of flavors.

Had he gotten it wrong? Had he misunderstood? Had Chu Wanning merely forgotten to throw the thing out?

The problem was so elementary that anyone could have figured it out with their big toe, but Mo Ran was stuck on it for ages. Worries filled his wandering thoughts as he absentmindedly washed the clothes in the bucket. He scrubbed and scrubbed, the water growing colder and colder as his heart burned hotter and hotter.

Mo Ran found himself staring up at the cottage. Rich golden candlelight shone through the paper of the window in its squat frame of aged wood. The flame flickered: dark one moment, bright the next, not unlike the tender shoot that had sprouted in Mo Ran's heart, shivering and swaying.

If Chu Wanning really liked him…

Once, Mo Ran had been the unabashedly thick-skinned Emperor Taxian-jun. But now, even this fleeting thought was enough to make him blush. He felt hot, his throat dry. It was a thirst no water could slake—the only thing that could ease the parched heat within him was the man inside that room. Only the sweetness of his mouth could soothe Mo Ran and bring him a moment of respite. Only the very man Mo Ran had sworn up and down to cherish, protect, and respect.

Respect. Mo Ran felt his burning chest had been splashed with water. He had always brandished this word to warn and rebuke himself whenever his ardent desire for Chu Wanning threatened to overmaster him. But things were different tonight. The brocade pouch was like a bundle of dry pine kindling thrown onto the fire in his heart, fuel for his wildest fantasies.

Respect. You need to respect him, Mo Ran chanted to himself. But the words were as futile as trying to douse a burning cart of firewood with a single cup of water. Those words had once quelled his yearnings; now, those same thoughts roared up into towering flames, instantly transforming that cup of cold water into curls of steam that misted his vision. Mo Ran found, much to his surprise, that this incantation of *You need to respect him* was finally rendered completely, utterly ineffective.

Inside, Chu Wanning polished off the last mantou. Thinking to wipe his fingers, he crossed to the bed and plucked the haitang handkerchief out of the pile of odds and ends. He sighed, inwardly lamenting his lousy

memory—he couldn't even remember to take this stuff out of his robes before washing them. Now he'd made a fool of himself in front of Mo Ran, and who knew if he…

"Hm?" Before he'd completed the thought, he spied a fine red cord peeking out from beneath a small mound of talismans.

His heart stuttered. He reached for the red cord to take a closer look, but his hand froze midway, stalled by fear. After a moment's hovering, he drew his hand back and slipped his fingers beneath his lapels to check the spot right next to his heart.

His face instantly fell. The silk-tree flower brocade pouch was missing!

Chu Wanning's expression was unsightly. He stood in shock for a beat as he realized what had happened. The interior pocket of the formal robes Xue Zhengyong had commissioned was slightly angled. Chu Wanning had always kept the brocade pouch from the ghost ceremony within his innermost robe, but he had worried it might accidentally slip out with the angle and how smooth the robes' texture was. Thus, he had removed it to the pocket of his outer robe.

He considered the heap of oddments with mounting panic. All the candy and other miscellaneous little items were piled on top, with the talismans stacked beneath. The red cord was right at the bottom. That it was so obviously hidden made it all the more conspicuous—as though the person who tried to hide it was saying, *I didn't see it, I didn't see anything at all*, while waving his hands and blushing furiously.

After a lengthy silence, Chu Wanning reached for the end of the cord. He held his breath, clinging to his last thread of hope, and tugged the brocade pouch free from the jumble of talismans.

Ah… Of course.

The red cord of the brocade pouch had been tampered with. The knot was not the one he always used.

Try as Chu Wanning might to stay calm, his fair skin flushed, and his ears turned so red they looked ready to drip blood. He loosened the cord and opened the pouch. The two locks of inky black hair had lain entwined for so many years, too like the hidden feelings that had wound round his heart just as long. Now, they tumbled starkly into the warm yellow candlelight, soft and supple in his hand.

Mo Ran had seen his brocade pouch. And afterward, he had buried it under all this random junk, obviously trying to pretend he'd seen nothing at all.

This knowledge set off an explosion in Chu Wanning's head. His heart pounded and his mind raced madly, his face burning like red-hot coals. What to do? Had Mo Ran realized the feelings he had tried so hard to hide?

…He was done for.

Mo Ran liked Shi Mingjing. If Mo Ran discovered what Chu Wanning felt for him, he would definitely be scared off. Would the newly gentle and warm relationship that had sprung up between them then crumble?

Chu Wanning's thoughts were a mess as he clutched the brocade pouch. It was a long time before he was able to calm himself. He could only hope Mo Ran hadn't figured it out. He gambled on his established reputation of being clear of heart and free of desire, and hoped Mo Ran hadn't realized anything at all.

When someone's years-long crush was discovered by the object of their affection, it would normally be cause for joy, a kind of liberation. That wasn't quite the case for Chu Wanning. He was thirty-two already, and long since used to being alone. Mo Ran and Shi Mei were in the most shining years of their youth, but Chu Wanning had spent those years of his life in solitude. It never occurred to him, now that he was in his thirties, that any chance remained for him to find true love and companionship. After all, to begin a relationship, one would first inevitably have to divulge their feelings—yet this came with the terrible, grievous risk of rejection.

Chu Wanning tucked the brocade pouch away. He paced back and forth in the room, eventually coming to a stop before the bronze mirror. He gazed up into it. Years of disuse had left a thick layer of dust on the mirror's surface, and he could only make out a blurry outline. He reached up and wiped his hand across the mirror. Amidst the grime appeared a face that was far from perfect. The corner of his eye landed exactly on a scratch in the mirror. Chu Wanning blinked at himself.

"Hideous."

He suddenly felt so annoyed, so disappointed with the person looking back at him. "Why do I…look like this?"

Mo Ran, he knew, liked men who were young, gentle, and pretty.

Chu Wanning managed to be precisely none of these things. His face was unlined, but he couldn't hide the weight time's passage had wrought upon his features. He had always been mature beyond his years, and now he had not a hint of youthful passion remaining. How could he have the nerve to be with a young person—his own disciple, no less? If word got out, never mind his own reputation; it would be deeply embarrassing for Mo Ran and Sisheng Peak.

And there was Shi Mingjing, whose incomparable loveliness had only grown during the five years Chu Wanning had spent in slumber. Even when he wasn't smiling, his gently curved eyes were like luminous peach blossoms. Chu Wanning looked again at his reflection. The face looking back was surly and arrogant. Between the two of them, only an idiot would pick Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning inspected the hazy yellow mirror. If he could reverse the passage of time and induce this ugly face in the mirror to fall in love while in his twenties, he might have harnessed the vitality of his youth to rashly confess his feelings. Even if he came out worse for wear, he would have survived. But he was now over thirty. His youth had fled, leaving behind only his wretched, wary, unkind self—along with a ferocious face that frightened children to tears.

Mo Ran was in the best years of his life, and Shi Mei was a beauty who could topple nations. As for Chu Wanning? He was just some unpleasant man who would never be young again.

He didn't dare ask for anything. He only wanted to hide. He only wanted to continue like this, slow and steady. He wouldn't dare entertain thoughts of reciprocation. If he could be allowed to quietly harbor these unrequited feelings, to like someone in secret, to treat that person well in his role as his shizun—then that would be enough, he thought. He would be quite satisfied.

A creak sounded behind him. Chu Wanning didn't turn. Within the bronze mirror, he saw Mo Ran enter the cottage, carrying a wooden bucket.

Neither spoke. The mirror was hazy, so Chu Wanning could only make out a tall figure standing in the entryway. He couldn't tell what expression Mo Ran wore or make out the shades of emotion within his gaze.

Despite admonishing himself repeatedly to remain calm, Chu

Wanning couldn't stop his heartbeat from quickening. He didn't want Mo Ran to see his look of embarrassment, so he untied his ponytail and held the ribbon between his teeth. Dipping his head, he made a show of putting his hair back up before the mirror.

Chu Wanning thought himself very clever. With the ribbon in his mouth, he had the perfect excuse to avoid greeting Mo Ran. So—

Fingers brushed the back of Chu Wanning's ear. He froze instantly in place. Though he tried to suppress it, a small shudder rippled through him.

Chu Wanning was unaccustomed to physical contact to begin with. And here was *Mo Ran* touching his ear, Mo Ran's large, rough palm, skimming the tender skin of his earlobe. Though it lasted but an instant, the contact made Chu Wanning's back tingle all the way up his spine.

He looked studiously at the ground. If he raised his head now, he feared Mo Ran would see that his face was unusually flushed, even through the dimness of the room and the haziness of the bronze mirror.

He bit down on the hair ribbon and mastered himself with great effort. "You're done with the laundry?"

"Mn." Mo Ran's voice was low and very slightly husky. Chu Wanning felt him lean in. The chill air lingered on Mo Ran, but it couldn't mask the sharply masculine scent radiating from him. It was enough to make Chu Wanning's head spin. His thoughts blurred and slowed to a stop.

Mo Ran brushed back the stray wisps of hair at Chu Wanning's temple. "Shizun, just now, I…" His words faltered.

Chu Wanning waited. What was Mo Ran trying to say? As he held the ribbon between his teeth, eyes downcast, his heartbeat seemed to stall.

Whatever Mo Ran wanted to say seemed too difficult to speak aloud. After a pause, he changed the subject. "Forget it, it's nothing. Are you putting your hair back up? It's late."

Chu Wanning didn't reply. His singular thought was that Mo Ran was standing entirely too close to him.

It was too hot.

"Are you going out?" Mo Ran asked.

"No, I was just going to wash the dishes," replied Chu Wanning.

“I’ll help.”

“My hands work fine,” Chu Wanning shot back.

Mo Ran laughed awkwardly behind him, as if he didn’t know what else to say. “Shizun’s hands work fine, but they’re clumsy sometimes. I’m worried you’ll break a dish.”

Chu Wanning couldn’t muster a response. Noticing his silence, Mo Ran thought he was annoyed. He reined in his smile and said earnestly, “The water’s cold outside. Remember to bring out some warm water and mix it in.”

The hum of Chu Wanning’s reply sounded like both “mn” and “hmph,” unclear yet undeniably pleasant to the ear. The sound roused that tender sprout in Mo Ran’s chest, urging it to grow faster. His throat bobbed slightly, and his shadowy gaze landed on the sliver of pale neck that showed over Chu Wanning’s collar when he lowered his head. He felt that same vexatious thirst and swallowed on reflex—though he did so as quietly as possible, not wanting Chu Wanning to hear.

Mo Ran took a deep breath and forced a smile. “This mirror is so blurry.”

“It hasn’t been used for a long time.”

“How can Shizun even see himself? Give me the ribbon—I’ll comb your hair for you.”

With the length of lilac silk still held between his teeth, Chu Wanning had no chance to demur before Mo Ran grabbed the ribbon. It would be too strange to keep biting down on it, so he resentfully let go and allowed Mo Ran to help him tie his ponytail. Feigning indignance, he snorted. “Do you even know how? If you don’t tie it right, I’ll have to redo it anyway.”

“Shizun, have you forgotten? At Peach Blossom Springs, I always tied your hair for you.”

Chu Wanning fell silent at once. His stint as Xia Sini was a humiliating piece of his past that he had no desire to revisit. He closed his eyes and scowled, letting Mo Ran comb out his hair. But with every stroke, Mo Ran’s palm lightly brushed against his ear. He felt horribly uncomfortable, his scalp numb and his throat dry, and his scowl grew deeper. “Are you just about finished?”

Mo Ran’s chest rumbled with a deep laugh. “Ah, you’re always so

impatient. Don’t worry, I’m almost done.”

His voice seemed even closer than before, like it was coming from just behind Chu Wanning’s ear. Chu Wanning found himself clenching his fists within his sleeves. Perhaps it was his delusion—he felt that Mo Ran’s breathing was a little heavy, like a wild beast readying itself before it pounced on its prey. Chu Wanning had the prickling sensation of being watched, as if a ravenous tiger crouched behind him, preparing at any moment to pin him against the bronze mirror, tear open his throat, and lap up the blood that spilled from his veins.

Such perceptions could at times be startlingly accurate—it was just that Chu Wanning’s self-esteem was too low for him to credit his senses. How was he to know that if only he looked up, he would see Mo Ran’s eyes in the mirror, bright yet shadowed, desire and reason clashing within, full of sparks and smoke?

As Mo Ran grasped the sleek silk ribbon, the clearheaded part of him commanded his body to diligently tie up Chu Wanning’s hair. But the darker half of his soul was gripped by fretful thoughts. *What am I doing—tying a ribbon? But this ribbon is being tied in the wrong place!* He felt that he should be shoving Chu Wanning against the dilapidated dressing table, using the ribbon to blindfold him with one hand while gripping his chin with the other. He should be kissing him voraciously, pressing him down to taste the sweetness of his mouth and sucking on the soft tip of his tongue. Clearly, he should be nuzzling at Chu Wanning’s ear and licking the tiny mole behind it; he should be breathing heavily against the shell of his ear and asking softly, “Chu Wanning, my dear shizun. Why did you keep that brocade pouch? Wanning… Wanning… Do you…like me?”

So painful was his yearning that he felt his heart would split open. His blood coursed scaldingly hot through his veins as his eyes burned red.

Chapter 176:
Shizun, Why Don't You Buy Me

WITH HIS PONYTAIL securely tied, Chu Wanning went out to do the dishes. There were only three bowls, but he stayed outside for quite a long time.

Mo Ran sat on the bed, restless with anxiety. He unwittingly dug his fingers into the crevice between the mattress and the wall, glancing at the window from time to time.

What do I do? he wondered. *How am I supposed to sleep tonight?*

This question might have seemed basic, but it was actually impossible to answer. Mo Ran couldn't be sure of Chu Wanning's feelings. As for himself, lust and rationality dueled in his heart, the flames of war roaring sky-high.

At that moment, the curtain lifted and Chu Wanning stepped across the threshold, wreathed in the outside chill and holding three freshly washed bowls. When he glanced at Mo Ran sitting on the edge of the bed in the flickering candlelight, there was some subtle emotion in his gaze. But he lowered his lashes a second later such that Mo Ran couldn't get a clear look before Chu Wanning settled at the table with his back to him.

"Shizun's not going to bed yet?"

The instant the words left his mouth, he felt he'd blundered. He sounded like a desperate man beseeching his lover to come to bed for the night.

Chu Wanning didn't turn his head. "I've still got some things to take care of," he said mildly. "Go to sleep first if you're tired."

"I'm not tired either," said Mo Ran. "What does Shizun need to do? I'll help."

"You can't help. I want to make some sound-recording haitang blossoms," Chu Wanning replied. With a graceful twirl of his fingers, a haitang glowing with golden light blossomed in his hand. He placed it carefully near the edge of the table.

These blooms were made from Chu Wanning's spiritual energy and could record and transmit a short spoken message—a secret technique of his own invention that none could imitate. Mo Ran was puzzled. He came

to the table and pulled out a chair, spinning it around to sit backward. His sturdy arms rested against its back, his chin pillowed on top. “What’s Shizun planning to do with these?”

“Sell them.”

“Huh?”

At the note of surprise in Mo Ran’s voice, Chu Wanning cast him a dispassionate glance. “We can’t afford to stay on Flying Flower Isle for seven days. Isn’t Third Lady Sun a businesswoman? Then I’ll do business with her. These are golden sound-recording haitang blossoms that stay fresh all year round. You saw how she’s dripping with gold and silver from head to toe—she clearly likes things that glitter. I’ll sell them on the street tomorrow and see if she bites.”

Mo Ran couldn’t help but laugh. “Shizun is going to…sell flowers?”[6]

Chu Wanning’s expression shifted slightly. Perhaps because he didn’t want to associate himself with those tawdry ladies selling white orchids in alleyways, he corrected Mo Ran sternly, “They’re blossoms made from *spiritual energy*. They don’t count as flowers.”

“I’ll go with you to sell them tomorrow.”

Chu Wanning didn’t reply. Bowing his head in concentration, he rapidly conjured a few more flowers before replying sulkily, “Do whatever you want. As long as you don’t find it too embarrassing.”

“Why would it be embarrassing?” Mo Ran plucked a flower off the table and sniffed it. The blossom was light in his hand and fragranceless, its glow singularly graceful. The golden light washed over his handsome face and dark lashes as he smiled. “I imagine Third Lady Sun will weep at the chance to buy these from Shizun. How much are you selling them for?”

“Even a hundred blossoms don’t require much spiritual energy. How about three for a copper coin?”

Mo Ran stared at him without a word.

Chu Wanning glanced at him again and frowned slightly. “Is that too much?” he asked, hesitant.

Mo Ran sighed. Rather than answer the question directly, he said, “Shizun shouldn’t name a price tomorrow. Allow me.”

“Why? I made the flowers. I should set the price.”

“Three for a copper coin.” Mo Ran waved three fingers in front of Chu Wanning, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. “Shizun, you’re the Beidou Immortal, and these are your Nightglow Haitang Blossoms, prized throughout the entire cultivation realm. You’re going to let them go three for a copper coin?”

“No one’s ever asked me for them. They’re pretty enough and good for transmitting messages, but not otherwise useful. I think the price is fair.”

Mo Ran laughed in exasperation. “Then why don’t you sell them all to me? I’ll give you the money right now.”

Chu Wanning’s hand stilled. Brilliant golden petals floated down as a half-formed haitang blossom was severed from his spiritual power. He held out his hand and responded calmly, “All right. Deal.”

Finding himself speechless, Mo Ran reached for his money bag before remembering that the island’s conniving merchant had already squeezed every last coin from both him and Chu Wanning.

He looked up, a bit embarrassed, and met Chu Wanning’s answering gaze. There was the barest hint of a smile on Chu Wanning’s face. Mo Ran felt doubly awkward. “Shizun already knew I didn’t have any money left…” he muttered.

Chu Wanning was amused. “You’re the one who boasted and said you’d buy if I were selling.”

“I…” Mo Ran swallowed the rest of his sentence—he suddenly felt that this phrase was rather ambiguous. What Chu Wanning should’ve said was “you’d buy if I were selling *flowers*,” but he’d lazily left off the last bit. It made it sound like Mo Ran wanted to spend his money on the man before him.

Mo Ran’s heartbeat picked up speed. He didn’t dare meet Chu Wanning’s eyes, afraid his shizun would detect the disgraceful intent in his own. But when his gaze caught on Chu Wanning’s hand, palm up as he waited, he discovered that those fingertips were red and chapped from the cold. When Chu Wanning had been washing the bowls outside, he had stubbornly kept at it until the warm water had turned freezing.

Without thought—almost out of habit—Mo Ran grabbed the hand outstretched on the table.

Chu Wanning jumped. He'd been feigning calm as he'd held out his hand, but instead of any coin, his fingers found themselves pressed between a pair of warm, broad palms. Those palms were just the right temperature, but he jerked his hand away like he'd been burned by a hot iron. "What are you doing?!"

Mo Ran had no unseemly intentions—heart aching, he'd truly wanted merely to warm Chu Wanning's chilled hands. He hadn't expected such a strong reaction and was stunned speechless.

The two of them looked at each other in the dim yellow candlelight. A drop of wax sputtered and popped, breaking the silence. Chu Wanning knew his skittishness had been suspicious, so he pressed his lips together and said nothing for a time, uneasy.

When Mo Ran saw his expression, the tender sprout in his heart pushed upward more vigorously, striving to straighten its soft form, making his chest itch. "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning said nothing.

"Do you…" Mo Ran's sentence caught in his throat. Not knowing what lay ahead, he skidded to a halt before the precipice, held back by reason. He couldn't finish the thought.

Mo Ran's question was incomplete. Nevertheless, Chu Wanning responded stiffly: "No."

Staring at him, Mo Ran asked, "No what?"

"No matter what you say, the answer is no." Chu Wanning scowled. Like a cat defending its territory with bared fangs, he was on guard, hackles raised. "Let go."

Mo Ran did. He laid his hand upon the chairback again, the picture of obedience. Chu Wanning returned to conjuring flowers, collecting the petals that had fallen earlier into a complete blossom. He was sulking, though mostly out of helplessness.

After a while, Mo Ran spoke up again. "Honestly, Shizun, I only wanted to ask if you felt cold. I just wanted to…warm your hands."

"I'm not cold."

Liar. The hand that Mo Ran touched had been icy.

It was obvious that Chu Wanning found this situation excruciatingly awkward. "If there's nothing else, you should get some sleep," he said.

“I’ll take you to sell flowers tomorrow.”

Mo Ran didn’t know how he should answer. Often, Chu Wanning used to say *I’ll take you to cultivate,* or *I’ll take you to meditate,* or *I’ll take you to study.* What was all this about *I’ll take you to sell flowers…* He tried, but mostly failed, to suppress the laughter that bubbled up in his eyes, his pupils reflecting the man in the candlelight. He let out a soft hum of agreement, but he really couldn’t bear to leave the table.

“Go to sleep.”

Mo Ran glanced at the bed. He’d resolved that he wouldn’t go to sleep before Chu Wanning no matter what. He didn’t know whether he was supposed to sleep on the bed or the floor, so he would wait and see what Chu Wanning did. If Chu Wanning went to sleep on the innermost side of the mattress, clearly leaving space for him, then he’d sleep on the bed. If Chu Wanning lay right in the middle, then… Ah, then he’d behave.

His face reddened as he sneakily schemed. “I won’t sleep yet.”

“What are you doing sitting here, then?” Chu Wanning frowned.

Mo Ran raised a hand and brought his long, slender fingers together. With a flourish, a fiery red butterfly made from spiritual energy appeared in midair.

Chu Wanning stared blankly.

“For sale.” Mo Ran grinned. With a light flick of his fingers, the red butterfly fluttered into the air and landed among the pile of Chu Wanning’s haitang blossoms on the table. As it dove in and out of the flowers, it flapped its glowing wings as if pollinating them. “Mine will be quite pricey. I’m a black-hearted scoundrel, so they’ll be ten gold apiece.”

Chu Wanning watched that pesky butterfly flying back and forth. It paused on one of his haitang blossoms to lap at its tender stamen. His face was like a thundercloud. “Mo Weiyu!”

“What is it?”

Chu Wanning was so furious, he didn’t know what to say or how to say it. He managed, finally, to quash the urge to explode. Flustered, he choked out, “Three copper coins each at the very most.”

Mo Ran laughed out loud. When he’d chuckled a moment, he spun out another fiery red butterfly. He held out his hand, and the butterfly gently alighted upon the haitang blossom forming in Chu Wanning’s fingertips. “If I’m selling them to others, it’ll be ten gold. I think the price

is fair."

"Then you can sell them to me!" Chu Wanning took a deep breath and said fiercely, "I'll go resell them myself. They can't be priced higher than my haitang blossoms." After some thought, he added, "But I don't have any money on me now. I'll pay you once we get back to Sisheng Peak."

Smiling, Mo Ran spun out the third butterfly and sighed softly as the butterfly danced around Chu Wanning on swift wings. With his head propped against those sturdy arms the color of golden wheat, he said gently, "Not a chance."

"Are you saying you won't let me buy on credit?" Chu Wanning raised his chin, his eyes shining with anger and his face haughty. If Mo Ran really dared to say he wouldn't take his credit, then, as his teacher, Chu Wanning resolved to properly discipline this impudent, delusional man.

That delusional man smiled even more brightly, his dimples deep and his tone warm. "No, I wanted to say…"

Wanted to say *what*? Chu Wanning's claws were bared, ready to strike out.

"I'll let you buy me out." Mo Ran left off the specifics, making this statement rather vague and suggestive. Resting his cheek against his arms, he gazed at Chu Wanning, perfectly earnest. "It's all yours, free of charge."

Never in a million years could Chu Wanning have anticipated such a response. Dazed, his face immediately flamed red.

The hour was late. The little cottage was piled high with spiritual butterflies and haitang blossoms—they already had more than enough to sell. Yet neither was willing to be the first to retire for the night.

Mo Ran's worries were self-evident. He figured he would see where Chu Wanning slept and act accordingly.

Although Chu Wanning wasn't aware of his plan, he wasn't stupid either—he felt a vague uneasiness. He, too, wanted to know what Mo Ran would choose. Would he sleep on the floor…or on the bed?

This man was giving Chu Wanning an ever-increasing sense of danger…but if Mo Ran really lay down on the bed, Chu Wanning didn't plan to chase him off. He was painfully aware of that hidden thread of

hope in his heart—the hope that he would see Mo Ran wearily get to his feet, say, “I’m sleepy,” and lie down on the bed.

Why is he still awake?!

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran each spun out more flowers and butterflies, both impatiently thinking the same thought: *Go to sleep already—if you lie down on the bed first, then I’ll…*

“Shizun.”

“Hm?”

“Are you tired? It’s so late, you should rest.”

“No need, I’m used to it.”

Thus another two hours passed.

“Mo Ran.”

“Hm?”

“Why are you still sitting here?”

“I’m making more butterflies. If Shizun’s tired, you should go to sleep first—I’ll be up a little longer.”

Chu Wanning expended every effort to suppress his yawns, grinding his molars together. He hadn’t slept for two nights in a row, and the rims of his eyes were red with fatigue. Yet still he insisted, “I’m not tired yet.”

Mo Ran watched him steadily.

Little by little, the room became an ocean of butterflies and haitang blossoms, overflowing with dazzling red and gold. Who knew how much time had passed when Mo Ran blearily raised his head again, only to jolt wide awake.

An exhausted Chu Wanning had slumped against the table and fallen asleep where he sat. A half-formed haitang blossom lingered on his fingertips, its petals fluttering delicately with each of his breaths.

Mo Ran stepped around and carefully lifted that fragmented flower. He placed it on the table and gathered Chu Wanning into his arms.

Chapter 177:
Shizun Pretends to Sleep

CHU WANNING HAD GONE two days without sleep; he had fallen into a deep slumber. Mo Ran quietly drew him into his arms and carried him to bed, his movements so gentle Chu Wanning never stirred.

Mo Ran placed him in the very middle of the bed. Cradling the back of his neck, he laid his head down softly on the pillow and pulled the blankets up over him. But after tucking Chu Wanning in, Mo Ran didn't step back. He fixed his eyes on Chu Wanning's face. Inch by inch, his infatuated gaze drifted from Chu Wanning's sooty brows down to his pale lips.

Gorgeous.

His shizun, his Wanning—how was he so damn gorgeous? After sneaking a few more glances, Mo Ran's heart softened, while a certain other part of him did quite the opposite. His scalp tingled, but reason was a yoke around his neck. He knew it was wrong—but Chu Wanning's face was so close, just a breath away, and the faint scent of haitang on his body was like an army of pliant talons piercing Mo Ran's facade of respectability, enticing Mo Ran to shed his clothes and join Chu Wanning in this warm bed.

Perhaps it was the surging of Mo Ran's blood like a rushing river, or the beating of his heart like an unstoppable war drum, or the scalding heat of his blazing gaze that woke Chu Wanning—whatever the reason, Chu Wanning abruptly blinked open his eyes.

For a moment, neither spoke. Mo Ran sat stock-still. As Chu Wanning's drowsiness gave way to astonishment, he met Mo Ran's fiery gaze with wide eyes. He jolted fully awake at once. "What are you doing?"

This strong and gallant youth wore an inscrutable expression. As he slowly leaned down, Chu Wanning froze in alarm.

"You—"

Mo Ran drew closer still. Chu Wanning's heart thumped wildly.

With a soft swish, their surroundings went dim, plunged into a suggestive gloom.

After he'd pulled the bed curtain closed, Mo Ran straightened and

settled on the edge of the bed. Looking down at Chu Wanning, he said evenly, “I saw Shizun fell asleep, so I wanted to close the curtains for you. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Chu Wanning didn’t make a sound. Propped against the pillow, he raised his head slightly to gaze at Mo Ran. The dull yellow of the drapes fluttered idly behind him, and the candlelight from the table had become nebulous and hazy, like fog gathered on a window in wintertime. It was too dim to read Mo Ran’s handsome features. There were only two shining eyes in the dark night, brilliant as fallen stars.

“Shizun,” Mo Ran said without preamble.

“Hm?”

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

Chu Wanning held his tongue. In the darkness, this disciple seemed to have screwed up his courage. Chu Wanning’s heart seized in his chest. *Is he going to ask me about the brocade pouch?* he wondered. His face remained impassive, but stormy waves surged in his chest. Was it too late to pretend to be asleep?

“Where should I sleep?” Mo Ran asked.

Chu Wanning stared at him in silence.

Immediately after asking the question, Mo Ran began to have regrets. His overeager and practically ravenous body had no business sleeping in the same bed as Chu Wanning. He was no stranger to how terrifying a man’s desire could be once awakened. And so, after agonizing over this very question for half the night, Mo Ran came to his own answer. “The bed’s too small. I’ll take the floor,” he concluded.

“Is there another set of blankets?”

“There is.”

“Will you be cold?”

“It’s okay, I’ll just add some straw.” And so saying, Mo Ran left the cottage to gather a pile of straw and returned to deftly flatten it into a pallet.

After the fright Mo Ran had given him, Chu Wanning was no longer sleepy. He flipped onto his side, head propped against the pillow, and lifted the bed curtain to silently watch Mo Ran bustle about.

“I’m hitting the hay. Sweet dreams, Shizun.”

Mo Ran lay down without removing his clothes and pulled the blankets around him. His ink-dark eyes were full of steady warmth as they gazed at Chu Wanning upon the bed.

“Mn,” Chu Wanning responded. At Mo Ran’s display of apparent obedience, Chu Wanning let out a breath of relief and put on his own show of perfect aloofness. Feigning disaffection, he released the curtain and lay back in his bed.

Mo Ran sat up again.

“What are you doing?”

“Putting out the light.” Mo Ran got to his feet and blew out the candle.

Silence descended upon the little cottage. The master on the bed and his disciple below both stared into the boundless night, their hearts each heavy with private worries, bathed in the faint glow of golden haitang blossoms and scarlet butterflies.

“Shizun.”

“What is it now? Are you sleeping or not?”

“I’m sleeping.” Mo Ran’s voice sounded exceptionally gentle in the darkness. “I just wanted to tell you something all of a sudden.”

Chu Wanning pursed his lips. His pulse didn’t race so quickly as the first time his imagination had gone haywire, but his throat still felt dry.

“I wanted to say… Shizun, you don’t have to be so cautious when you sleep. You always curl up in one corner of the bed.” There was a hint of a smile in Mo Ran’s voice, low and mellifluous.

“It’s just a habit,” came Chu Wanning’s eventual reply.

“Why?”

“My room’s too messy. One time I fell off the bed when I rolled over in my sleep and cut myself on a file on the floor.” His words left Mo Ran speechless for a long, long moment, until Chu Wanning asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Mo Ran. His voice sounded closer than before. Chu Wanning turned his head. Through the gauze of the curtain, by the faint light of the haitang blossoms and butterflies, he saw that Mo Ran had pulled his pallet over to the bed.

Mo Ran lay down once more. “Shizun doesn’t need to worry when

I'm around," he said with a laugh. "You won't be stabbed by anything if you fall." After a pause, he added, almost carelessly, "I'm here."

Chu Wanning said nothing.

A while later, Mo Ran heard a soft snort from the man on the bed. "Your biceps are so hard that hitting them might be no better than hitting that file."

Mo Ran chuckled. "There's something even harder that Shizun hasn't seen yet."

He was, honest to goodness, thinking of his pecs—but the instant the words left his mouth, he realized how filthy they sounded. Panicked, he blurted, "That's not what I meant."

Chu Wanning had already lapsed into an embarrassed silence after the first sentence; now, the atmosphere between them had truly deteriorated beyond saving. Of course he knew Mo Ran was in possession of a hotter and harder weapon far more terrifying than any of Chu Wanning's glinting mechanical implements. Forget that accursed cultivation world ranking list he'd glimpsed by accident; he had inadvertently felt the thing for himself through their clothes. *That* was a weapon so full of fearsome passion that it sent shivers down one's spine.

"Go to sleep," Chu Wanning snapped.

A pause. "Mn."

But how could they possibly sleep? The two of them lay in the throes of love's torment, its magma lapping at their chests, so searing their ribcages were on the verge of cracking. In the quiet of the room, each could hear the other's soft breathing, his tossing and turning.

Pillowing his head on one arm, Mo Ran stared at the dancing scarlet butterflies filling the cottage. One fluttered over to the bed curtain, casting its warm red glow upon the gauze.

In the silence, Mo Ran suddenly remembered—

At Jincheng Lake all those years ago, the person who had rescued him from the Heart-Pluck Willow's illusion seemed to have murmured something into his ear. He had been too far gone in the moment—perhaps he'd imagined it. He couldn't be sure. But reflecting on it now, he felt that his ears might not have deceived him after all.

That it might have been real.

Back then, when he had heard Chu Wanning say, “I like you too.”

Mo Ran’s heart raced. Each seemingly insignificant detail from days past was like twigs and cuttings scattered upon the ground, now sprouting and branching out, tender leaves and vivid stamens unfurling. Nourished by this brazen thought, they grew into a towering tree.

His mind was curiously blank, the world a dizzying blur before his eyes. The more he thought about it, the more impossible it seemed…

“I like you too.”

I like you too.…

If he had misheard, if Chu Wanning had never said these words, then why had he been unwilling to admit he’d been the one to save Mo Ran when they woke up from the illusion in Jincheng Lake? It made no sense. Unless Mo Ran hadn’t misheard! Unless Chu Wanning had really said—

Mo Ran jolted upright in bed, unable to contain his agitation. “Shizun!” he called hoarsely.

Silence.

There was no response from behind the curtain, but Mo Ran pressed ahead nevertheless. “When I was doing the laundry today, I found something. It was…”

Within the drapes, everything remained perfectly still.

“Do you know—what it was?” As the words crowded to the tip of his tongue, he suddenly panicked. The question came out clumsy and halting.

No reply came. The silence stretched.

Mo Ran hesitated, his eyes dark and shining. “Shizun, are you asleep? Did you hear anything I said…”

Lying on the bed, shielded by the thin gauze curtain, Chu Wanning didn’t move a muscle. He might have really been asleep. Mo Ran waited. He reached a hand toward the curtain several times in dissatisfaction, only to stop himself at the last second.

“Shizun,” he mumbled a final time, before lying down once more. His voice was terribly quiet, even fragile. “Pay attention to me.”

But of course his shizun would do no such thing.

Chu Wanning was a total mess. He had always taken pride in being

clear of mind, but now his head may as well have been filled with black smoke. He lay on the bed, staring blankly at the swirling hui-patterned canopy in the darkness. *What exactly is Mo Ran trying to do?* he wondered, his thoughts sluggish and stiff. He racked his brain for an answer, considering every sort of outlandish possibility.

The only one he didn't dare entertain was the most obvious—he didn't dare suppose that Mo Ran liked him too.

He was like a starving man who had unexpectedly found himself in possession of a delectably crispy meat pie. Because the pie was hard-won and precious, he'd gnawed off the entire crust, but couldn't bear to start on the meaty filling.

Chu Wanning listened to Mo Ran's low, harried murmurs penetrating the barrier of the canopy. He soundlessly drew the blanket up, covering his chin, then his nose, leaving only a pair of bright eyes. Then he pulled it over his eyes as well, until he was completely hidden beneath the covers.

Of course he had heard Mo Ran. But how was he supposed to respond?

His heart thundered, and his palms were clammy with sweat. He felt mortified, backed into a corner. He wanted nothing more than to sit straight up and launch into a fearless tirade: *That's right! I hid that brocade pouch! Fine! I like you! There! Satisfied? Now get lost! Stop asking questions and go the fuck to sleep!*

He was tormented, on tenterhooks. A terrible itch gnawed at his chest.

"Shizun?"

Silence once again.

"Are you really sleeping…"

A long moment later, Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran sigh softly. Lying there in the darkness, head under the covers, he felt despondent yet terrified, nervous yet also somehow warm and tender—his emotions were a muddled mix of flavors, bitter and sweet and everything in between. He reminded himself to keep calm. But eventually, he found himself kicking the blanket in frustration as his cheeks burned with heat.

Chapter 178:
Shizun Sells Flowers

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Chu Wanning climbed out of bed, his eyes ringed with dark circles. Because he'd slept poorly, he seemed especially glum. His face, usually impassive to begin with, had iced over, devoid any sign of vitality.

He pushed open the cottage door to find Mo Ran washing clothes outside. But…why was he doing laundry first thing in the morning? Didn't he just wash his clothes yesterday?

Mo Ran seemed somewhat abashed when he spied Chu Wanning emerging from the cottage. Traces of suds on his cheek, he turned in greeting. "Shizun."

"Mn."

"Third Lady Sun is as good as her word. Now that she's got her money, she's sent breakfast over to every house. I put ours on the little stone table in the yard—Shizun, you should go eat."

"What about you?"

"I already did." The contours of Mo Ran's hands were crisp and strong under the rippling water. "When you're done with breakfast, let's go sell butterflies and flowers."

The breakfast sent over by Third Lady Sun was simple but ample in quantity—three whole mantou. Chu Wanning sat in the courtyard and nibbled at the buns. The morning sunlight streamed through the grapevines winding around the trellis above, scattering flecks of brilliance across the table's surface.

He glanced over his shoulder. His eyes lingered on Mo Ran's tall figure, and a vague sense of warmth surged in his chest. Chu Wanning quickly turned away, chomping viciously into the helpless bun.

The golden haitang blossoms and red spiritual butterflies caused a huge and immediate stir at Flying Flower Isle's humble village market. All the fishermen rushed over at once, and even those who hadn't planned any purchases that day were enticed by the spectacle.

“Flowers!”

“What’s so exciting about flowers? Surely you’ve seen flowers before?”

“Golden haitang blossoms! Made of spiritual energy! In bloom all year round! And they can transmit messages!”

“Wow! Where? Where are they?”

A throng of people scurried over.

“Butterflies!”

“What’s so great about butterflies? The place is lousy with them in the spring.”

“Red ones! Made of spiritual energy, and they can repel little ghouls! Plus they’re so pretty and docile—they flutter around next to you and don’t fly away!”

“Ahh! Really? Where? Where are they?”

Another horde followed in their wake.

Word of the commotion eventually reached Third Lady Sun, who was at leisure in her manor. She couldn’t resist decamping to the marketplace with several attendants in tow. Before she reached its entrance, she saw distant glimmers of gold and scarlet flashing among the dense crowd and heard the onlookers gasping in awe. Heart crawling with want, she flung aside the crowd of commoners and strode over to take a look.

She spied the two cultivators who had arrived the day before. One wore a brilliant smile and was conjuring flashy tricks to attract the crowd’s attention. The other had his face turned indifferently aside and was standing under a tree, arms crossed in wordless silence.

“Butterflies for sale, butterflies for sale!” The gallant young man looked back at the expressionless one. “Shizun, why don’t you hawk too?”

Hawk? Chu Wanning snorted to himself. He didn’t even know how this word was written. Could he really be expected to shamelessly conduct himself like the uncouth Mo Weiyu and holler to the thronging crowd, “Flowers for sale, haitang flowers for sale!” Perish the thought.

The onlookers hesitated for some time, imagining that these cultivational wares must be staggeringly expensive. At last, one of the bolder islanders stepped forward. “How much for the butterflies?”

“Ten gold apiece,” said Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning cleared his throat.

“…Three coppers apiece,” he amended.

“That’s it?”

The crowd was visibly shocked. Customers began to press forward one after another. Mo Ran handed out butterflies to his left and flowers to his right.

As he worked, he caught sight of a small girl standing off in the distance. She was dressed shabbily in rags and chewed on her fingertips, gazing longingly at this bustling scene. With a wordless grin, Mo Ran swiftly drew his fingers together to produce a stunning swallowtail butterfly. He blew on it softly, sending it floating over the sea of people to alight just above the girl’s ear.

The girl froze in astonishment. She took a few halting steps forward before stopping again and shaking her head. She had no money… The girl didn’t have a single copper coin, much less three.

Mo Ran waved at her and mouthed, *It’s a gift*. Batting his eyelashes, he turned away and busied himself with the crowd.

Third Lady Sun watched slack-jawed as these lovely spiritual charms left, one after another, in the hands of their new owners. Some of the island girls who had an eye for baubles had tucked the haitang blossoms into their hair. The flowers cast a golden glow over their dark locks, making for a marvelously luxurious sight.

“I’ll take every single one of these butterflies and flowers,” Third Lady Sun blurted out.

Mo Ran looked up, his smile never faltering. “And here I was wondering who had such deep pockets—of course it’s you, Third Lady.”

“How many are left? Count them, I’ll take them all.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Mo Ran smiled sweetly. “It’s all first-come, first-served, you see—since these good people were here before you, and we still have plenty left, we can’t just let you buy all our stock.”

Looking out at the crowd of villagers, Third Lady Sun began to worry that the butterflies and haitang blossoms might sell out before her turn came. “Then I’ll pay more,” she replied.

“I’m not the boss here,” said Mo Ran. “I’m just helping out. You’ll have to see my shizun if you want to talk money.”

Third Lady Sun strode toward the tree to speak to the flower-selling cultivator Chu Wanning. “Xianjun, why not sell your butterflies and flowers to me? We’re all people of business here—name your price.”

“Ten gold apiece,” Chu Wanning said coolly.

Hearing this, Mo Ran had to laugh out loud. When he turned to meet Chu Wanning’s night-dark eyes, tenderness bloomed with his amusement. He grinned and scratched his head, dimples deep and striking.

Third Lady Sun was rolling in money; she didn’t bat an eye at such a measly expenditure. She promptly instructed her servants to gather all those Nightglow Haitang Blossoms and swallowtail butterflies and cart them away.

Once back at her manor, the delighted Third Lady Sun pulled her hair into a high bun and festooned it with fifty or more gleaming golden blossoms. She directed the butterflies to flutter around her in lazy loops. With golden light spewing from her head, she resembled nothing so much as a melting candle. The servants found the sight hilarious, but seeing as she was the head of their household, they had no choice but to hold back their laughter until their ribs ached fit to break.

Third Lady Sun’s satisfaction was not to last. Soon enough, someone stopped by the manor to report that the two cultivators were hawking new wares at the market. The news shook her to her core. Crowned with a dazzling coiffure and wreathed in a tornado of butterflies, she set out afresh for the market.

“Butterflies for sale! Butterflies for sale!”

Third Lady Sun squeezed her way through the crowd. Hands planted on her hips, she snapped furiously, “Didn’t I just buy you out? Where’d these come from?”

Mo Ran blinked innocently. “We made more.”

“You can just *make more*? Why’d you ask for ten gold a pop then?”

Mo Ran smiled. “Think of it like this: let’s say you wake up one morning and head to a stall selling pan-fried soup dumplings. It’s a popular stall, with a long queue of people already waiting, but you insist on cutting the line. If the stall’s owner were to tell you that you can get your food faster—you’ll simply have to pay a premium—wouldn’t that

make sense?"

"Y-you swindler!" Third Lady Sun sputtered in rage. "You…"

As she cast about for the right words to refute his twisted logic, she saw that the hitherto-silent cultivator had approached. With a flash of gold at his fingertips, Chu Wanning produced a pair of twin haitang blossoms sharing a single stem.

Irate as Third Lady Sun was, the new flowers intrigued her. "What's this now? Why is it different from the ones before?"

"This type of haitang has a beauty spell cast upon it. If one places it at their bedside before going to sleep, they will wake the next day with a radiant complexion. It should last about fifteen days." Chu Wanning nonchalantly handed the flower to Mo Ran. "Go ahead, sell it—a hundred gold per blossom."

"Hold it." Third Lady Sun couldn't bear the prospect of these two lecturing her again about cutting in line. Though she was hopping mad, she commanded, "Stop right there—I'll take this one. How many more do you have? I'll take them all!"

"I don't like to cast the same spell too many times," said Chu Wanning. "There are only three."

"Then here's three hundred gold. Take it."

"You may hand it to Mo Ran," Chu Wanning said. He lowered his head to conjure two more double blossoms. After passing them to Third Lady Sun, he started to form a fourth flower.

Third Lady Sun was vexed to no end. "Did you not say you were only making three?"

"This one will have a sound-sweetening spell," Chu Wanning said mildly. "When a woman wears it upon her person, it will make her voice more pleasing to the ear."

Third Lady Sun coveted youth even more than money. She watched greedily as this esteemed cultivator from Sisheng Peak coaxed to life one wondrous haitang after another. Teeth aching with resentment, she could only say, "All right, all right, I'll take them. I'll take them all."

When Mo Ran and Chu Wanning returned to the cottage that night and closed the door behind them, they poured their full purses onto the

table. Their earnings were more than enough to feed and house the refugees until the fire on the distant shore went out. Chu Wanning pushed half of the coins to Mo Ran and put away the other. “Any leftover money goes back to Third Lady Sun when we leave.”

“Why?” Mo Ran blurted out, startled.

“Flying Flower Isle is far from Linyi and poor in resources. Food, clothing, and supplies are difficult to come by. But look at the fishermen on the island—few lack for food or warm clothing. Don’t you find this a bit strange?”

After a moment’s consideration, Mo Ran had to admit that it was indeed so and assented with an “Mn.”

“The reason is apparent if you ask around a little. While you were manning the stall today, I went to talk with the village elder. It seems this Third Lady Sun used to be a disciple of Rufeng Sect. But because her talent was small, her master didn’t spend much time on her. After five years of study, she’d only learned a few superficial sword techniques.”

Mo Ran hadn’t expected this. “She was a member of Rufeng Sect? Then, did Shizun know her—”

“No,” said Chu Wanning. “According to the village elder, when she was seventeen, she came to Flying Flower Isle with a group of Rufeng cultivators to recruit new disciples. Those established cultivators exploited the island’s remoteness and the status of its residents as commoners. Even if these people were abused, they couldn’t possibly make the long trip to Rufeng Sect to seek redress. Thus, the cultivators committed assorted crimes against the islanders over their time here—they stole food and money, and even…”

“Even?”

“Even took advantage of several young men and women.”

Mo Ran fell silent.

“Third Lady Sun was furious,” Chu Wanning continued. “She confronted the senior disciples. Though her standing was low, she had a fiery temper and made enemies of her companions. In the end, they conspired against her—a shixiong ran her through and pushed her off a cliff into the sea.”

“Seriously?” Mo Ran muttered. “No wonder the village elder made it a point to say we weren’t from Rufeng Sect or whatever when he was

persuading her to let us stay. Who would've thought that… Ugh…"

"Mn. She was fortunate the sword missed her vital organs. After she fell into the ocean, a fisherman spotted her from his boat. That fisherman had two daughters who'd both died young. He took the girl he'd saved in as his foster daughter and taught her how to fish and conduct business. When her foster father passed, she took up his mantle and eventually established herself as the richest merchant on Flying Flower Isle."

Chu Wanning paused. "Remember, she did say that Flying Flower Isle had a poor harvest this year, and that she'd opened her own granaries to provide relief rations to every household. Third Lady Sun makes an excellent living, but she only ever cheats cultivators and never takes so much as an extra copper from the islanders. In fact, she even lends them a hand in lean times."

Mo Ran said not a word. He thought back to the little girl at the market who had gazed so longingly at the haitang blossoms. From her shabby clothes and grubby face, it was obvious that she was an orphan. But she wasn't skinny—her cheeks were round, her eyes bright. If someone hadn't been helping her, if she needed to beg for all her food, wouldn't such a young child be skin and bones?

"Third Lady Sun makes at least twenty trips crossing the sea to the mainland each year. It's a rough voyage that takes a full week round trip. If you do the math, she spends half her life at sea. You saw how sumptuous her manor is, and she must be over fifty by now. Why would she still go out to brave the wind and waves? Why would she spare no effort in traveling to Linyi to sell the island's goods and bring back much needed supplies?" said Chu Wanning. "She clearly isn't hurting for money herself."

When he'd heard the story to the end, Mo Ran felt a dull pain in his chest. "I understand." He picked up his half of the money and stood at once to leave.

"Where are you going?" Chu Wanning called after him.

"I'm going to return what we made off her."

"Sit down," Chu Wanning said calmly. "Why are you being so silly?"

"Huh?"

"Consider the kind of person Third Lady Sun is—she's got a strong

personality and a fiercely competitive streak. She despises cultivators more than anything… If you march over there and return this money to her, who's to say she won't grab a stick and beat you until you flee her manor?"

Mo Ran's back ached at the very thought. He heaved a helpless sigh. "Then what should I do?"

"I've already arranged everything with the village elder. We'll leave the excess with him before we leave, and he'll find a way to hand it over to Third Lady Sun," Chu Wanning replied. "We'll be far away by then, and the money will benefit the residents of the isle. She won't refuse it."

Eyes downcast, Mo Ran contemplated this for a moment. He nodded. "Shizun is right. Let's follow this plan."

Chu Wanning sighed. "Many things in this world can't be evaluated on appearances alone. Sometimes, even digging one layer down isn't enough to unearth the truth. I remind myself always to rein in my emotions before rendering judgment, whether on people or actions—it always pays to be cautious. But sometimes I can't help myself."

These words were not at all to Mo Ran's liking. Judging if a person was good or bad or if an action was right or wrong based on appearances —was this not exactly what he had once done to Chu Wanning?

He wasn't alone in this. Mere mortals often found it exceedingly difficult to take in and contemplate truths hidden beneath the dust of the world with clear eyes and calm hearts. Whether it was Mo Ran regarding Chu Wanning, or Nangong Si regarding his mother, who among them had never been led astray by their emotions or blinded by appearances, ultimately committing some irreversible mistake? Perhaps only someone like Chu Wanning—who was outwardly indifferent and cold, yet always set room aside in his heart for people to redeem themselves—could look upon the world without assuming others' malicious intent. The more Mo Ran came to understand him, the more he realized that this Beidou Immortal, who appeared the most irascible of all, in truth possessed a rare unjaded, unsullied heart. His prideful, detached exterior hid a kind and forgiving soul.

Mo Ran bore an incredible tenderness toward Chu Wanning and this gentle soul of his. He felt, as well, a powerful urge to protect him. Perhaps it was because he himself had stumbled out from mountains of corpses and seas of blood, his hands covered in gore, that he understood there was

nothing in the world more valuable than a sincere heart. Such a heart was the clear call of a flute through the smoke of war, a blossom unfolding in the trenches.

Thus Emperor Taxian-jun, once the scourge of the world, thought silently to himself as he faced this soul: if ever there came a day it was needed, he would do anything to protect this clean and pure Beidou Immortal. Whether his body was battered and his blood ran dry, whether his corpse was mutilated and his ashes scattered, whether he had to offer up his skull and every one of his blighted souls.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Ah—nothing.” Mo Ran smiled. “Nothing important.”

“Nothing important?”

Mo Ran pursed his lips. Suddenly, he recalled that Chu Wanning had mentioned as they walked to the market this morning that he wanted to learn to ride a sword. “Shizun, come with me,” he said.

Chapter 179:
Wanning

THE PAIR OF THEM reached the edge of the cliff on Flying Flower Isle. Far below the craggy cliffs lapped the roaring sea, its waves scattering into snow-white flecks of foam as they crashed to shore. Before them was only the endless sea and sky, and the waxing crescent of the moon.

Mo Ran summoned his oathbound sword and turned to Chu Wanning. “Shizun, how is it that you never learned to ride swords?”

“It’s not that I never learned,” replied Chu Wanning. “I’m just not good at it.”

“How are you not good at it?”

Chu Wanning shook his sleeves out. His expression took on a touch of haughtiness, but his ears had turned red. “I can only fly close to the ground.”

This somewhat astonished Mo Ran. It required the same amount of spiritual energy to ride a sword whether you were one inch off the ground or hundreds of feet in the air. If Chu Wanning could fly near to the ground, there was no reason he couldn’t travel at greater heights. “Shizun, just give it a try—let me see.”

He was met with silence. Chu Wanning didn’t summon his sword. After a moment, he said with a bland expression, “The reason I don’t usually ride my sword is because I believe weapons deserve respect. It’s not fitting to step on them.”

Mo Ran blinked in confusion. He didn’t understand why Chu Wanning had abruptly launched into this explanation, but still he nodded. “Shizun is right, of course. But…we can’t fly lying down or hanging from our swords, can we?”

Chu Wanning was momentarily speechless. He glanced up to see Mo Ran looking at him bright-eyed in the moonlight and felt a spike of irritation. “Usually, I use the Rising Dragon Array to fly if it’s urgent.”

Taken aback, Mo Ran asked, “That little dragon?”

“It can get bigger,” said Chu Wanning. He felt as though he had saved himself some face, but embarrassment quickly set in again. “However, it was impossible to use that technique during the inferno at

Rufeng Sect. It's afraid of fire."

This time, Mo Ran was flabbergasted. "So Shizun wants to learn how to ride a sword because you want to—"

"I want to be ready in case it's necessary."

Mo Ran sank into silence. The furious sea of flames and smoke in Linyi had claimed innumerable lives. At that time, Chu Wanning had stood on Mo Ran's sword, watching the hellish inferno devour the commoners below. Entire families had burnt to ash, leaving not a single bone behind. Chu Wanning, despite being a great cultivator, had found himself powerless—he couldn't carry a single person out of the carnage on his sword. How must he have felt then? It was small wonder that this man, who had always preferred to ride in a horse-drawn carriage rather than on his sword, had suddenly made this request of his own disciple.

"I understand. Don't worry, Shizun. I'll teach you properly."

Chu Wanning made no reply but cast his gaze downward, his thoughts unfathomable. At last, he sighed and raised a hand. "Huaisha, come."

A beam of golden light coalesced. Above the serene sea and below the moon, Mo Ran once again laid eyes on the holy weapon that Chu Wanning, in the past life, had summoned only once, in their battle to the death.

Chu Wanning's killing blade: Huaisha.

It was clear at a glance that this longsword suited Chu Wanning perfectly; there was probably no one else in the world more fitting to be its master. It was sparsely decorated, and its body glowed with a golden light of such intensity that it appeared almost white. Brilliance emanated, unhurried and unceasing, from the blade, its light like a blazing fuse, or like grains of white sand scattered across the nightscape.

"This is Huaisha." Chu Wanning eyed the blade. "You've never seen it. I don't use it often; its nature is too vicious."

Mo Ran's mood was complicated. After a long silence, he nodded and said in a low voice, "It's a good sword."

The night wind whistled past. Mo Ran stepped onto the blade of his own sword. As he shifted his weight ever so slightly forward onto his toes, the sword obediently rose several inches into the air.

Mo Ran turned around. "Shizun, try this."

Chu Wanning stepped onto Huaisha. The blade rose steadily into the air and carried Chu Wanning in a tight circle.

"Not so bad, is it?" asked Mo Ran. "Now try going a little higher." So saying, he coaxed his own sword up until it was nearly five feet off the ground. He looked down and grinned at Chu Wanning. "Come up here."

Chu Wanning pressed his lips into a tight line. Without a word, he directed Huaisha to draw level with Mo Ran's sword.

"No problem at all—see, Shizun, you already know how. Let's—"

Mo Ran swallowed the rest of his sentence. He'd suddenly noticed Chu Wanning's deathly pale face, his features rigid and his lashes trembling in the breeze like blades of grass. He looked like he was silently enduring with all his might.

After glancing down at the ground, which was less than five feet away, Mo Ran stared up at Chu Wanning in disbelief. A preposterous notion struck him—

Could it be that Shizun couldn't ride a sword because…he was afraid of heights?

Mo Ran was at a complete and utter loss for words. This was simultaneously incredibly awkward and surpassingly difficult to believe. Chu Wanning's qinggong was second to none—he could scale any tower at will and leap from any height on a whim, soaring countless lengths with a single light bound. How could such a person be afraid of heights? But Chu Wanning now wore a dreadful expression atop his sword, his eyes darting restlessly back and forth. As much as he tried to restrain it, a faint panic surfaced on his features.

"Shizun?" Mo Ran ventured cautiously.

Chu Wanning's reaction was extreme—he jerked his head up at once. The night wind blew stray locks of hair into his face, but he didn't raise a hand to brush them away. His elegant phoenix eyes flashed with annoyance, sparks of warning issuing from behind the windblown strands. "Hm?"

"*Cough.*.. Pfft."

"What are you laughing at!"

"My throat's dry. I coughed." Mo Ran's ribs nearly cracked with the effort of holding back his laughter. *Gotcha,* he thought. So Chu Wanning really *was* afraid of heights. No wonder he'd gone to such lengths to

explain himself earlier—he was just trying to rescue his dignity.

Well, if Shizun wanted to save his dignity, then his disciple naturally had to play along and provide his master a graceful way out.

"To tell the truth, riding a sword gets more difficult the higher you go," Mo Ran said. "When I first started, I couldn't go much higher than five feet either. It just takes practice."

"You also couldn't go any higher?"

"Mm-hmm." Mo Weiyu, who had flown several hundred feet into the air the very first time he'd stepped on a sword, nodded kindly. "It might not have even been five feet—I was too scared to look down, so it was probably…only three? So low Xue Meng kicked me back to the ground without any trouble."

Chu Wanning's heart settled ever so slightly. He had always been mortified to tell anyone about his fear of heights and attendant inability to ride a sword. But it seemed it wasn't anything to be ashamed of after all.

"Shizun, try not to look down."

"Hm?"

"Just look at me." After a moment's thought from his vantage high above Chu Wanning, Mo Ran dipped lower once more. "Don't think about how high you are—just come up until you're level with me."

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and rose higher. With the narrow and slippery blade under his feet, the once warm night wind became as cool and damp as a snake. It squirmed beneath his collar, hissing and flicking its tongue.

"Don't look down, don't look down." Mo Ran chanted patiently as he held his hand out to Chu Wanning. "Come up and take my hand."

Chu Wanning was fully absorbed in his task. "There's no need, I'm fine."

Mo Ran didn't push. He knew Chu Wanning's temperament; if he wanted to do something himself, as long as the situation wasn't dire, it was best to let him have his way. This man, accustomed to being a towering tree, wasn't used to relying on others. He could only make Chu Wanning feel comfortable and at ease by staying at his side and standing alongside him.

Mo Ran very much wanted to turn Chu Wanning into gentle and

pliant spring water, to crush Chu Wanning with his body, to break him in his arms and melt him into his blood. He was no different from most men in the world—he would always have some unrealistic, frightening desire to take possession of the person he loved so deeply. Such was his nature; these were his instincts. That domineering male instinct made him yearn to lock Chu Wanning up, to spend their endless days and nights entwined, to force Chu Wanning to swallow all of Mo Ran's boundless passion.

He longed to have Chu Wanning lying atop a soft bed all day, wreathed in swirling incense and heady perfumes, hidden from the sight of all but himself. He longed for Chu Wanning to spend a lifetime beneath him as he buried himself within Chu Wanning's warmth without surcease. He longed for the dark bruises on Chu Wanning's skin to never fade. He longed to transform him into a greedy beast whose hunger could be sated only by the most potent and fiery lovemaking night after night.

But love made the thought of doing these things unbearable to Mo Ran. Because of love, he wanted to treat Chu Wanning with respect. He wanted to see him stride ahead with white robes afloat, to see him fly far afield with sword in hand. He wanted to watch Chu Wanning rise haughtily above the forest, unfurling his leaves and casting out his kindly shade. He wanted to allow him to flourish, even if it meant his branches might be broken in the wind and rain.

Love chained his instinct and bridled his beastly desire. It compelled him to lower his lashes and restrain his ardent breath, and demanded that he abide by the rules. It tamed his primal impulse and pulled the frightful fangs from his mouth.

In the last lifetime, love had made him possessive, so he'd become selfish. In this one, love made him accepting, and thus he became selfless. He wouldn't, as he had in the past, attempt to imprison Chu Wanning or change him. This belated, pure love rendered the man who had once been Taxian-jun willing to serve, to spend the rest of this lifetime as Chu Wanning's companion and no more.

Bit by bit, their swords circled higher. At a certain point, Chu Wanning couldn't keep his fingers from trembling slightly within his wide sleeves, even if he didn't look down. His scalp tingled.

Mo Ran could tell he was nervous. "Don't be afraid. It's the same as qinggong."

"It's not the same," Chu Wanning replied. "I rely on myself for

qinggong. For sword-riding…"

"You also rely on yourself."

"You rely on the sword to ride the sword!" Chu Wanning snapped.

Mo Ran held his tongue. He was beginning to have some idea of why his shizun's qinggong was exemplary, yet he was terrified of riding swords. Chu Wanning wasn't in the habit of relying on anyone or anything. He felt most at ease when he relied on himself and himself alone.

The realization made Mo Ran's heart ache. "It's okay, Shizun," he said. "You need to trust Huaisha."

Though Chu Wanning remained outwardly calm, he couldn't hide the anxiety and alarm in his eyes. When Mo Ran noticed the light sheen of sweat on his brow and the unsteadiness of his stance, he knew they couldn't go on like this. If Chu Wanning were to fall from his sword now, his fear would only grow. "Let's go back down," he suggested.

Chu Wanning couldn't have been happier to hear this. Once they were safely on the ground, he gathered his bearings for a moment, then asked, "How high did we go?"

Mo Ran promptly decided to round up. "More than fifty feet."

As expected, Chu Wanning's eyes widened in shock. "Really?"

"Yup." Mo Ran grinned. "Shizun's pretty impressive—next time, we'll manage five hundred with no trouble."

The mere notion of so much height made Chu Wanning's already pallid face blanch further. Wordlessly he waved a hand and stared blankly at Huaisha.

After a moment's consideration, Mo Ran added, "Shizun, how about this—I'll take you up on my sword for a lap so you can get used to it."

"You don't have to. It's not like we haven't done that before."

"But have you ever looked at the ground from atop the sword?"

He had hit the nail on the head—whenever Chu Wanning rode on someone else's sword, he would always fix his eyes on the wielder's back or on some other random spot as much as possible, using all the power of his imagination to pretend his feet were planted squarely on the ground.

Mo Ran summoned his sword again and enlarged it. After stepping on, he turned to Chu Wanning. "Come on now," he said gently.

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and leapt nimbly onto the hilt.

"Watch your footing," Mo Ran said. He pushed lightly off his toes, and the sword spiraled upward into the clouds. Chu Wanning closed his eyes without thinking and heard Mo Ran's low laugh in his ear. Shaking off his nerves, he steeled himself and looked down.

With this single glance, every hair on Chu Wanning's body stood on end. That rascal Mo Ran had taken him soaring into the highest reaches of the clouds. Far behind them, Flying Flower Isle was receding steadily into the distance. The wind whistled past his ears, and the frigid evening air thoroughly chilled him even through his robes. Other than the sword, there was nothing else beneath his feet. They flew above the vast ocean, the blue-black waters like the yawning maw of an ancient beast ready to swallow all passing souls.

Frozen lashes trembling, Chu Wanning was about to instinctively shut his eyes again when he heard Mo Ran's voice from behind him. "Don't be scared. Everything's fine."

"I'm…not scared." Chu Wanning's face was white as paper.

Mo Ran chuckled. "Okay. If you say you're not, then you're not. If you're cold or bored, just let me know. I'll take you back to the island."

Chu Wanning said nothing. He knew Mo Ran was trying to salve his dignity. After all, a mighty cultivator shivering from cold was slightly more respectable than a mighty cultivator shivering from terror.

Mo Ran could tell Chu Wanning was struggling but unwilling to admit it. His heart twinged. "I'll make the sword a little bigger." He lifted a hand, and the sword expanded to several times its original size. Now he and Chu Wanning could stand side by side.

Chu Wanning was drawn taut as a bowstring. In an attempt to get him to relax, Mo Ran said, "Shizun, the fire in Linyi will die down in a few more days. What should we do about the people we brought here when we return to Sisheng Peak?"

Amazingly, even in his distress, Chu Wanning seriously considered the problem. "We'll bring them back to Sichuan."

"Hm?"

"Let's take them to Sichuan first. Once the fire goes out, Linyi will be nothing but scorched earth. No one will be able to live there."

"Okay." Mo Ran gazed at Chu Wanning's stark white face until he

couldn’t bear it anymore. “Should we head back?”

“Not yet.”

Mo Ran directed the sword to grow wider still. Thinking it would be more comfortable than standing, he gestured for Chu Wanning to take a seat, then cast a barrier spell.

Looking over at him, Chu Wanning asked, “What are you doing?”

“Just a cold-dispelling barrier.” Mo Ran’s eyes were gentle. “It’s chilly up here.”

Chu Wanning didn’t stop him. This barrier was very similar to his own—even down to the glowing haitang blossoms adorning the diaphanous membrane. The principal difference was that Chu Wanning’s barrier was gold, while Mo Ran’s was a brilliant red.

Surrounded by this translucent barrier, Chu Wanning’s tense muscles slowly relaxed, and his breathing became more even. Even if he knew the spell did nothing but dispel the cold, it felt like there was another layer of protection around him. Or perhaps it was that the boundless black of the ocean below didn’t look quite so unnerving through the barrier.

Mo Ran sat down beside him and smiled. “Shizun, look over there.”

“What is it?”

“Do you see it?”

He stared in the direction Mo Ran pointed without understanding. Chu Wanning knitted his brows. “All I see is the moon.”

“That’s what I mean.”

Chu Wanning was puzzled. “What’s so great about the moon? It looks the same from the ground.”

Mo Ran laughed. “This is my first time moongazing with Shizun.”

Chu Wanning didn’t reply right away. It was only after a long moment, after Mo Ran already assumed he would leave it at that, that he murmured softly, “It’s not the first time.”

“…What?” Caught off guard, Mo Ran turned to look at him.

With his handsome features bathed in silvery moonbeams, Chu Wanning’s complexion was like the pristine white petals of a flower in the cool night. Behind the dense curtain of his lashes, his eyes seemed to be filled with memories deeper than the ocean.

“It was so long ago, you’ve probably forgotten,” said Chu Wanning. “It’s not a big deal.”

Mo Ran didn’t know what to say. He had been alive longer than this version of Chu Wanning before him, and many of the earlier events from his past had lost their definition. Just because Chu Wanning remembered something didn’t mean it was also hidden within Mo Ran’s heart.

He looked at Chu Wanning’s profile and was swept by a wave of guilt—but within that guilt, too, blossomed an irrepressible sweetness. He found himself thinking of the brocade pouch, of what he’d wanted to ask yesterday. Why had Chu Wanning kept their interlaced locks of hair, and so many old memories? Butterfly Town, Jincheng Lake…

During the Heavenly Rift, he had given up his life to save Mo Ran. Why?

Mo Ran had never before dared to entertain such brazen fantasies. He’d thought himself unthinkably bold, irredeemably shameless. But every new discovery over these past few days had only stoked his wild audacity.

Why?

“Shizun.”

“Mn?”

Hot blood surged through Mo Ran’s chest. His throat felt dry. As he stared at Chu Wanning, his eyes were very bright. He had a sudden urge to move closer, to cup his face and kiss it, to gather his courage and ask: *Do you… Do you like me?*

On this sword, between heaven and earth, Mo Ran had a fantastical thought. It seemed as though none of the world’s shackles could restrain the two of them any longer. As if all the love and hate of the past had never transpired, and what was between them was as serene and pure as the moonlight streaming through gossamer clouds. He felt as though the small seedling in his chest had grown into a great tree. Its rough roots loosened the heavy, stifling dirt, filling the air with the rich scent of the earth.

Noticing that Mo Ran had sunk into a long silence, Chu Wanning turned to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

Mo Ran didn’t answer. His mind was a whir; he wanted to have him, to hold him, to kiss him. Without thinking, he leaned in.

Only then did he realize that, though Chu Wanning had recovered

somewhat since he'd put up the barrier, his bloodless lips were still pressed together, and his complexion remained wan. He sat with his arms crossed, gripping his own elbows, his long, slender fingers clenched tight in the ice-cold fabric of his sleeves.

Even when Chu Wanning was afraid, he clung to himself instead of others.

Mo Ran stared, dumbstruck. The possessive glint in his eyes winked out and rekindled as glimmering motes of light, like the gentle lanterns of fishing boats at sea. He pursed the lips that had yearned to kiss Chu Wanning, curving them instead into a soft, bittersweet smile. He stilled the hands that had wanted to brashly embrace him, and, after a moment, touched the back of Chu Wanning's freezing hand.

"You…" Chu Wanning was caught off guard. A faint flush surfaced on his pale face, but he spoke in a low voice laced with warning. "What do you think you're doing?" He wanted to yank his hand away, but Mo Ran had already grabbed it and wasn't letting go. Chu Wanning felt a large, warm palm close around his ice-cold fingers. His entire hand was seamlessly engulfed, from the back of his palm to the ends of his fingertips.

"You don't have to do everything yourself," said Mo Ran. "I'm here—you can rely on me."

Up until this point, Chu Wanning had managed to maintain a modicum of calm. But he couldn't miss the emotion contained in these words, no matter how oblivious or uncertain he was—to say nothing of those heart-stoppingly dark eyes gazing at him, solemn and serious, gentle and doting. Chu Wanning's pulse drummed like raindrops in a driving storm, pounding away in the space between his souls.

He didn't dare meet Mo Ran's eyes; he jerked his face aside and ducked his head.

It was too hot. They were hundreds of feet in the air—how was it so hot?

Chu Wanning had always been independent and in control. But right now he seemed to have stepped into a realm wholly foreign to him. His armor had been peeled away, his sharp claws clipped. Faced with Mo Ran's earnest expression, Chu Wanning felt all his usual tricks were useless. This man had pried open his shell and now stared unflinchingly at the trembling, lustrous meat within, gleaming pearls and salty-sweet flesh

alike laid bare before his eyes. With his armor removed, this proud and self-possessed person suddenly felt terrifyingly vulnerable.

What to do…

What was he supposed to say?

He…

Mo Ran was still holding his hand, grasping it tightly in his own. Anxious and nervous, Chu Wanning found himself at a loss. The rims of his eyes reddened, and he unconsciously tried to yank his hand away again.

But Mo Ran tightened his grip at the first twitch. His palm was slightly clammy with sweat. “Don’t pull away.”

Chu Wanning said nothing. Mo Ran had used considerable strength, and his hold was stubborn and insistent. Somehow, Chu Wanning thought he heard a note of sorrow in his tone.

Mo Ran’s eyes were fiery as he fixed Chu Wanning with a long stare. Finally, voice low and husky, he said, “Chu Wanning…”

“What did you just call me?”

“…I misspoke.”

Chu Wanning tensed even more, and his heart raced faster than when he’d stood on his own sword. He wasn’t used to this at all. Teetering at the edge of this vast abyss, he mounted a final struggle, making a last-ditch bid to take control of the situation. He looked downward. “Mn, at least you recognize your mistake. Perhaps you’re not beyond…”

Mo Ran’s heart was on fire. Finally, he blurted thoughtlessly, “Wanning.”

…Saving.

Chu Wanning didn’t manage to get the last word out. When he heard Mo Ran’s last sighing, gentle utterance, his mind filled with a buzzing blankness. He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Beyond saving.

Beyond saving—

They had hesitated so long at the brink of the mire that was love. At last, they couldn’t resist that final step forward, falling deep into its embrace. Henceforth, they would be hopelessly ensnared, that ache sinking

down to their bones.

Mo Ran's eyes were fixed on Chu Wanning, and his voice was deep and hoarse. "Wanning, these past few days, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

Chu Wanning watched him, silent.

Mo Ran's heart burned. His fingers shook as he gripped Chu Wanning's hand. "No—I won't ask you."

Chu Wanning let out a breath of relief—but Mo Ran continued.

"I won't ask you anything. I just want to tell you." Mo Ran steeled himself; there was no turning back. With a single deep breath, he summoned all of his courage. "I like you." His heart juddered violently. "I like you, not in the way a disciple likes his shizun, but…I know I'm being horribly bold—I…I like you."

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. His fingers, surrounded by this man's humid warmth, gradually stopped shaking.

How.

How…

He had surely misheard. He was so ugly, so harsh, so clumsy with his words, so uninteresting. He was a total fool without a single redeeming quality. Who would like *him?*

"I like you."

Chu Wanning remained frozen for what seemed like an age. He truly didn't know what to say. His heart was filled with grief; he was thrown off balance. Somewhere within him, he felt both bitterness and dread, yet his mind was curiously blank. He wanted to sweep his sleeves back and snap *Nonsense!* or *Ridiculous!* as he normally would, but all the words that occurred to him remained stuck in his throat.

When he finally unfroze, Chu Wanning mumbled blankly, "I have a terrible temper."

"You're very good to me."

"I-I'm too old."

"You look younger than I do."

Chu Wanning was on the edge of panic. Bewildered and helpless, he said, "I'm so ugly…"

Now it was Mo Ran's turn to be stumped. His eyes widened as he gazed at the handsome man before him. He didn't understand how someone so beautiful could disparage himself so.

Seeing Mo Ran silent, Chu Wanning felt all the more lost and scattered. He dipped his head. "I'm not good-looking."

Mo Ran stared.

"Not as good-looking as you." As Chu Wanning muttered quietly, he suddenly felt a warm hand brush over his cheek. He heard Mo Ran sigh, gentler than the moonlight.

"Do me a favor—look into my eyes?"

"Your eyes?" Chu Wanning asked, confused.

Mo Ran's gaze was warm and mild. In his irises was reflected the image of a man in white robes. "Do you see him?" he said. "The most beautiful person in the whole world."

Chu Wanning gaped at him. Even as his heart roiled with fearsome waves, his wintry features, not so easily thawed, remained mostly impassive.

Mo Ran's hand was damp as he gripped Chu Wanning's palm. "I like you," he repeated softly.

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It was as though Chu Wanning had been stabbed. His fingers trembled, and after a moment, he let his head fall. The words *I like you* were like a sharp knife piercing his heart, from which blood spilled in an unstoppable stream. The rims of his eyes were red. Perhaps he had waited too long to hear these words; he'd never expected to have this kind of reaction. He was so fretful he was on the verge of tears. "I'm no good. Nobody's ever liked me."

Nobody's ever liked me. Nobody's ever felt happy or proud or lucky to have me. It's been thirty-two years, and nobody's ever liked me.

As Mo Ran heard this, as he watched the man before him with his head bowed and face obscured, a staggering ache tore through his heart, as though it might fracture. Chu Wanning was his treasure, yet he had been hidden beneath the dust for half his life.

Mo Ran ached so much he couldn't speak. He didn't know what he was supposed to say. Finally, he squeezed Chu Wanning's hand and said clumsily, over and over, "That's not true, that's not true."

You have someone who likes you. I *like you. Someone wants you, you're wanted—don't be so self-deprecating and foolish anymore. Don't speak of yourself as if you're worthless, because you're the best. Dummy.*

Chu Wanning, you dummy. I like you.

After a long stretch of silence, Mo Ran asked, "And you?"

It took Chu Wanning a moment to respond. "What?"

Mo Ran lowered his quivering lashes. "I…I'm really dumb and oblivious and unreasonable, and I…I've done many unforgivable things." He paused. "Could you like me?" he asked in a small voice.

Chu Wanning had already raised his head, but upon hearing this question, he met those soft black eyes, his heart a jumble. Without knowing where he got the strength, he ripped his hand out of Mo Ran's and turned his face away.

He didn't nod or shake his head, neither confirming nor denying. But Mo Ran could see plainly that Chu Wanning's ears had turned red, a blush that extended all the way down his lovely neck like the stem of a flower.

"That brocade pouch…"

"Don't say it," Chu Wanning cut in. His whole face was red now. "You're not allowed to say it."

Mo Ran looked at Chu Wanning's chagrined yet embarrassed, angry yet bewildered face. Light and shadow flickered in his pupils, blending with the moonlight. He shifted closer and grasped Chu Wanning's fingertips again. Chu Wanning was shaking, but Mo Ran's fingers were trembling too. He covered Chu Wanning's slender fingers. And then, one by one, he interlocked them with his own for the first time—their fingers folded together, their palms pressed close.

Blushing furiously, Chu Wanning turned his face even farther away. But this time he didn't try to struggle free. Holding onto Chu Wanning's hand, Mo Ran finally, belatedly, disbelievingly confirmed that Chu Wanning…liked him too.

At last, he knew.

Chapter 180:
Shizun, How Could I Let You Down?

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME Chu Wanning had held hands with Mo Ran like this—fingers interlaced, palms pressed together. That was enough for him; it was too much, even. Thank goodness Mo Ran didn't do anything else, or he would have tumbled hundreds of feet out of the sky to make his escape.

Thank goodness indeed.

As for Mo Ran, he'd held hands with Chu Wanning like this far too many times. This wasn't enough for him; it was far too little. Thank goodness he hadn't done anything else—otherwise handholding would've led to kissing, which would've led to him asking for even more once he'd gotten a taste.

Thank goodness indeed.

Nevertheless, Mo Ran could tell Chu Wanning longed to flee. No sooner had they landed and dismounted the sword than Chu Wanning sped off without a word. Within two strides, he realized he was being too hasty and slowed down. Yet, a few more strides later, he heard Mo Ran's footsteps behind him. Overcome with embarrassment and panic, Chu Wanning quickened his pace again.

Mo Ran wordlessly watched him go. His heart itched and ached, burning up and melting all at once. He saw Chu Wanning, eyes fixed on the ground, marching straight toward a large tree.

"Watch out!" Mo Ran cried.

A loud thud.

Well. He had hit it head-on. Mo Ran rushed over. "Does it hurt? Let me see."

Chu Wanning pressed a hand to his forehead, absolutely silent. After a moment's recovery, he set off walking again. As Mo Ran moved to go after him, he heard Chu Wanning call over his shoulder, "Don't follow me."

"But…I'm also going back to rest."

"Stay outside and cool off in the wind before you come in."

Cool off in the wind? Mo Ran laughed. How could he possibly cool off? *I held your hand; my heart will be warm all night long.* But he heeded Chu Wanning's instructions and hung back. Instead he stood under the cool, clear moon, watching Chu Wanning dwindle into the distance until his figure disappeared behind a wall.

He walked over to the tree that Chu Wanning had crashed into. Stilling for a moment, he pressed his forehead to its trunk, the bark covered in rough scars. He closed his eyes.

Chu Wanning…liked him.

In a rush of fluttering petals and flowing waters, spring had sprung on this solitary isle. The luminous moon hung overhead, and the crisp clouds shielded the slumbering sun. The tide surged in the darkness as sky and sea merged into a single expanse.

Not a wonder in the mortal world could compare with that one sentence: Chu Wanning liked him. No matter how bad with words or how stupid he might be, Mo Ran was overwhelmed by a tidal wave of emotions at this moment. Love could make a poet of even such a crude simpleton as Mo Weiyu.

Chu Wanning liked him, Chu Wanning… Chu Wanning liked him!

He pressed his forehead to the rough bark, trying to calm down, to get ahold of himself, to cool off, to…

It was impossible. He could never again be calm, cool, or restrained. His closed eyelids fluttered, tenderness and ecstasy trapped between his lashes. The corners of his lips quirked up, his dimples tucking themselves deep into his cheeks, overflowing with sweetness.

Chu Wanning liked him.

Liked him.

The person he was so hopelessly infatuated with, the very best person in the world, the person he wanted to hold in his arms for the rest of his life—Chu Wanning, *Chu Wanning…*

The man who was once the terrible emperor Taxian-jun, who was now the cultivation world's esteemed Mo-zongshi, stood on a desolate beach of white sand, pressing his forehead to a great rustling tree with his eyes screwed shut, laughing out loud, his shoulders shaking.

Because Chu Wanning liked him, even the wind smelled sweet; even the crash of the waves sounded sweet.

Chu Wanning liked him.

He laughed with gaze downcast, but after a while, his laughter turned to tears. His mouth split into a madman's grin as tears streamed down his face. It was so sweet, yet his heart throbbed in agony.

Chu Wanning…liked him. Since Butterfly Town, he had secretly carried the brocade pouch with their intertwined locks of hair.

He liked him…

Suddenly, Mo Ran wanted to know how long Chu Wanning had been standing in his shadow, silently keeping him company, wordlessly waiting for Mo Ran to look back, to reach out, to turn around and see him.

How long had Chu Wanning waited? In this lifetime—and the last. Two decades in total? No, even longer than that.

He was Mo Weiyu, who had seen all there was of the mortal world. He knew time was the most priceless thing of all. In his days of power, when his whims had been as changeable as the weather, he could have had any precious plaything or sweet-talking beauty he wanted. But time, flowing past like a river, was the one thing he could never catch.

Someone willing to give up ten thousand gold for you—that was desire. Someone willing to give up a dazzling future for you—that was love. But someone willing to give up twenty years of their life for you, their very best years; someone willing to wait for you, without saying a word, without asking for reciprocation, and without asking for results—that was foolishness.

It was really the height of foolishness.

Mo Ran's throat was dry. Bitterness climbed up his throat and rushed into his mouth. He thought—

Chu Wanning, you're a fool. Why are you like this? How could you be like this? How could I, Mo Weiyu…let you be like this? You're the best person in the whole world.

And me? My hands are washed in blood. Even death would be too merciful for me. I'm the bane of the world, a villain who deserves never to be reincarnated. I bullied you, resented you, disappointed you—I drove you to your death. You have no idea what I've done… You have no idea!

Mo Ran hugged that tree, his sobs carried away by the sighing sea breeze. What had he done…

As Chu Wanning looked on, Mo Ran had chased after somebody else. As Chu Wanning looked on, Mo Ran had stupidly waited for that other person to turn around. In the illusion within Jincheng Lake, he had said to Chu Wanning's face, *Shi Mei, I like you.* He had taken a knife and carved out Chu Wanning's heart!

And what had Chu Wanning done?

He had remained silent as a stone, unmoved by the currents rushing past him. He had acted completely unaffected, even as the blade tore into his chest. He had cared for Mo Ran, forgiven him, and stayed by his side until death.

…All the way until his death.

Mo Ran howled with laughter and wailed in pain. Under the moon, surrounded by the sea and sky, witnessed by no other soul, he teetered toward the brink of insanity.

Chu Wanning had spent two lifetimes—*two lifetimes*—keeping his feelings from Mo Ran until death and beyond. The humblest thing this lofty and unyielding man had ever done was fall in love with someone. For that someone, Chu Wanning had done all he could, even when he learned, over the course of his endless waiting, that there would never be a place for him in that person's heart. Even when Chu Wanning knew that person wouldn't love him back. He'd chosen not to bother him or alarm him. He chose not to cause a whit of trouble for him. He chose to hold onto his last scrap of dignity.

As he lay dying in the last lifetime, all he'd said was *It was I who wronged you. I won't blame you, in life or in death.*

And when Mo Ran had confessed to him in this lifetime, Chu Wanning—this infinitely good, infinitely proud man—had only said, "I'm no good. Nobody's ever liked me."

Taxian-jun…Mo Weiyu…what…have you done… What have you done! Were you blind or were you mad? How did you miss this? How did you let him down?

Chu Wanning lay in bed with the curtains drawn. Through the misty shadow of the fabric, he watched the candlelight outside the canopy. His face burned and his heart raced, but his thoughts had slowed, like a half-frozen stream.

In contrast to the man outside, whose happiness was marred by the stain of own sins, Chu Wanning's happiness seemed especially simple and pure. He reached a hand up and stretched out his fingers before his eyes. By the time he realized what he was doing, he had already covered the back of his hand with his other palm, as if mimicking the way Mo Ran had held his hand just now.

When Chu Wanning finally snapped out of it, he sat dazed for a moment. Then annoyance immediately consumed him. He loathed himself for being so infatuated with Mo Ran's silly show of strength that he couldn't put it out of his mind.

Hopeless!

Seething, he pulled his hands apart and even slapped the back of his right hand in self-admonishment.

A creak, and the door opened. The curtain fluttered in the errant night wind.

Chu Wanning turned over at once and closed his eyes to feign sleep. He heard Mo Ran step into the room and cross over to the bed. A tall, broad frame blocked the guttering flame of the candle. Even through the curtain, Chu Wanning could see that the light had suddenly dimmed. Mo Ran's shadow over the bed seemed to press down on Chu Wanning. He could scarcely breathe.

"Shizun, are you already asleep?" Mo Ran's voice was soft. For some reason, it carried a raspiness in it, as though it had been washed in saltwater.

Chu Wanning didn't reply.

Mo Ran stood for a long time. Then, as though afraid to wake Chu Wanning, he carefully and quietly made up his bed in the same spot he'd slept the night before and blew out the candle.

The room was instantly plunged into darkness. Now that the piles of butterflies and haitang blossoms were gone, the shadows were deeper than before—oppressively so, enough to sharpen one's senses. The darkness brought with it a sense of both dread and anticipation as to what the rest of the night might hold.

But Mo Ran didn't do anything. This scoundrel who had once frequented brothels and made a name for himself in the pleasure districts suddenly turned clumsy and cautious, careful and protective. He settled

himself down, fully clothed.

Chu Wanning let out the breath he'd been holding. He felt a slight twinge of disappointment, but before he had time to feel ashamed, he heard Mo Ran get up. The bed curtain swished aside as Mo Ran lifted it.

Heart practically in his throat, Chu Wanning still didn't move a muscle. He stayed curled up, pretending to sleep, and even did his best to slow his breathing. He hoped Mo Ran wouldn't notice anything amiss.

What had Mo Ran gotten up to do? Chu Wanning had never been with anyone, never broken his abstinence. His only knowledge of anything sex-related came from those preposterous dreams. He was like someone who had never been in water, whose terror of the waves far outweighed his thirst. He would prefer to start off by splashing around in a small pool where the water came only waist-high. If he were to face directly the rushing rapids of a river, he feared he might drown.

He was not a little afraid of Mo Ran trying anything more daring.

Chu Wanning didn't know if it was because Mo Ran could feel his minute trembling or hear the faltering rhythm of his heartbeat, but he only stood calmly in the dark. Then he leaned down—

He bent low enough that Chu Wanning could feel the fervent, masculine aura radiating from his skin, as though that blazing-hot chest was about to crush him. But Mo Ran just looked down at Chu Wanning and smoothed a stray lock of hair behind his ear. Then, with a rustle of the bedclothes, Mo Ran tucked the blanket more firmly around him.

Chu Wanning's nervousness eased. He felt both satisfied and not, but at least it seemed that Mo Ran was still a well-behaved perso…

This thought was still forming in Chu Wanning's mind when the allegedly well-behaved individual dipped his head downward.
Chu Wanning only sensed something soft and warm meet his cheek.

In an instant, his mind burst into a tempestuous cascade of waves that pummeled the rocky shore and sent snowy seafoam flying. Mo Ran's scent swirled and smoldered around him, a torturous heat.

Mo Ran had kissed him on the cheek.

How many could behold their beloved's sleeping face and bear merely to look, to tuck them in and bid them goodnight? Mo Weiyu had exhausted all of his control and patience. This body of his, which had so strenuously held all of his deepest desires in check, finally let slip one soft

and tender kiss.

Chu Wanning's heart pounded mightily. Poor Yuheng of the Night Sky—this matchless hero, calm and unruffled wheresoever he went, found his cheeks set ablaze and his palms slicked with sweat between Mo Weiyu's heated breaths.

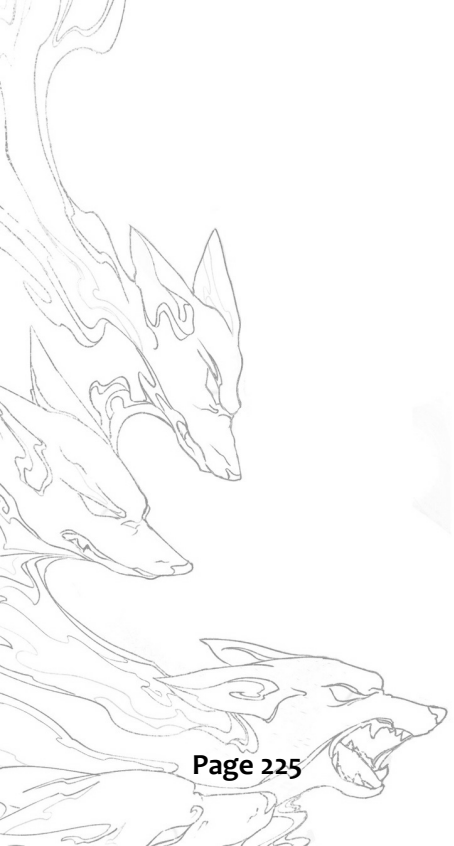
For a moment, he could think or feel nothing at all; even his breath was stopped in his chest. His heart galloped so rapidly that it didn't seem to belong to him anymore. The heavens and earth were a single hazy expanse, a blur of nothingness. At the same time, a flame seemed to flare to life within his belly, and brilliant dots of light skittered across his vision. Utterly dazzled, he could think only one thing:

Mo Ran was kissing him. Even if it was just on the cheek.

He had no capacity to consider anything else, such as how long this kiss lasted. His sweaty fingers clutched the blanket tight, and his lashes quivered uncontrollably…

It was a good thing that the night was so dark Mo Ran couldn't see his irrepressible trembling.

It was also a good thing that Chu Wanning's face was hot and his awareness muddled. He didn't feel that, when Mo Ran kissed him, a warm teardrop slid down his cheek and came to pool quietly in the crook of Chu Wanning's neck.



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THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
VOLUME 6

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

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Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, “ink”; given name Ran, “to ignite”

COURTESY NAME: Weiyu (微雨 / “gentle rain”)

TITLE(S):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / “treading on immortals”)

WEAPON(S):

Bugui (不归 / “no return”)

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, “seeing ghosts”; metaphorically, “What the hell?”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Fire

Orphaned at a young age, Mo Ran was found at fourteen by his uncle, Xue Zhengyong, and brought back to Sisheng Peak. Despite his late start, he has a natural talent for cultivation. In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. Reinventing himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, he committed many atrocities —including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately killing himself. To Mo Ran’s surprise, he woke to find himself back in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all new choices, which is where the story begins.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran has realized many things are not as they had seemed in the previous lifetime, a realization that came to a head after Chu Wanning’s death while sealing the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. During the five years of Chu Wanning’s seclusion following his return from the underworld, Mo Ran wandered the land making a name for

himself as Mo-zongshi.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning “evening peace”

TITLE(S):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, “late night”; Yuheng, “Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major”)

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 / Beidou “the Big Dipper,” title *xianzun*, “immortal”)

ALSO KNOWN AS: Xia Sini (夏司逆 / homonym for “scare you to death”)

WEAPON(S):

Tianwen / 天问 “Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life’s enigmatic questions.” The name reflects Tianwen’s interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 “Nine Songs.” Chu Wanning describes it as having a “chilling temperament.”

Huaisha / 怀沙 “Embracing Sand to Drown Oneself.” Chu Wanning uses it rarely because of its “vicious nature.”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering, as well as an elder of Sisheng Peak. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has only three disciples to his name: Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran. In Mo Ran’s previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive and eventually died as a prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran’s shizun, as well as the target of Mo Ran’s mixed feelings of fear, loathing, and lust. Unaware of Mo Ran’s rebirth, Chu Wanning has been acting in accordance with his own upright principles and beliefs, which culminated in his death during the events of the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. With the aid of Master Huaizui and Mo Ran, he returned to the world of the living, but only after five years in seclusion.

Chu Wanning’s titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same

constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning's weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons' primary attacks, such as "Wind," take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风 / feng, "wind"), courtly songs (雅 / ya, "elegant"), or eulogies (颂 / song, "ode").

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng "blind/ignorant"

COURTESY NAME: Ziming (子明 / "bright/clever son")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

The "darling of the heavens," Chu Wanning's first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang's son, and Mo Ran's cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires. His weapon is the longsword Longcheng.

Shi Mei

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, "to conceal"

COURTESY NAME: Mingjing (明净 / "bright and clean")

EARLY NAME(S): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, "little girl")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Water

Xue Meng's close friend, Chu Wanning's second disciple, and Mo Ran's boyhood crush. Gentle, kind, and patient, with beautiful looks to match, Shi Mei often plays peacemaker when his fellow disciples argue, which is often. Where Mo Ran and Xue Meng are more adept in combat, he specializes in the healing arts. In the previous lifetime, he died during the events of the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, but in this lifetime, it is Chu Wanning who dies in his stead.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

WEAPON: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang (王夫人)

Xue Meng’s mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran’s aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect, having once been Jiang Xi’s shijie, and specializes in the healing arts.

A-Li (阿狸)

Madam Wang’s cat. Not pregnant, just fat.

SISHENG PEAK ELDERS

The names of Sisheng Peak’s elders vary in origin. Most of their names come from the constellation Ursa Major, such as Chu Wanning’s “Yuheng.” Three elders take their names from the Sha Po Lang star triad used in a form of fortune-telling based on Chinese astrology.

Jielü Elder

戒律长老 Jielü, “discipline”

In charge of meting out discipline.

Xuanji Elder

璇玑长老 Xuanji, “Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star”

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Lucun Elder

禄存长老 Lucun, “Phecda, the gamma Ursae Majoris star”

Beautiful and foppish. Has a habit of phrasing things in a questionable manner.

Qisha Elder

七杀长老 Qisha, “Polis, the Power Star in Sha Po Lang”

Very done with Lucun Elder.

Pojun Elder

破军长老 Pojun, “Alkaid, the Ruinous Star in Sha Po Lang”

Forthright and spirited.

Tanlang Elder

贪狼长老 Tanlang, “Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang”

Sardonic and ungentle with his words. Skilled in the healing arts, and on pretty bad terms with Chu Wanning.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

叶忘昔Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, “to forget the past”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

A disciple of Rufeng Sect, the adopted child of Rufeng Sect’s chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright individual. Noted by Mo Ran to have been second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world, in the previous lifetime.

Nangong Si

南宫驷 Surname Nangong; given name Si,“to ride,” or “horse”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

The only son of Rufeng Sect's leader, who in their previous lifetime died before Mo Ran's ascension. Brash, headstrong, and volatile in temperament. He rides on his faewolf, has a hearty appetite for meat and wine, and an antagonistic relationship with Ye Wangxi. He is currently engaged to Song Qiutong. His holy weapon is the jade bow, Mantuo.

Naobaijin

瑙白金 Nao, "carnelian"; bai "white"; jin "gold"

Nangong Si's faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Song Qiutong

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, "autumn, tung tree"

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bears a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joins Rufeng Sect as a disciple and eventually gets engaged to Nangong Si. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Nangong Liu

南宫柳 Surname Nangong; given name Liu, "willow"

Leader of Rufeng Sect and father to Nangong Si. Rumored to be the second-richest person in the cultivation world. Has a gifted tongue for flattery. Seems to have some negative history with Chu Wanning.

Xu Shuanglin

徐霜林 Surname Xu; given name Shuanglin, "frost, forest"

Ye Wangxi's adoptive father, who has a carefree attitude and can never quite remember to keep his shoes on.

Rong Yan

容嫣 Surname Rong; given name Yan, "beautiful"

Nangong Liu's wife and the mother of Nangong Si. She passed away

many years ago when Nangong Si was still young.

Nangong Changying

南宫长英 Surname Nangong; given name Changying, “lasting, hero”

The founder of Rufeng Sect.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, “to hold, snow”

A striking cultivator with pale gold hair and jade green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an appreciator of wine and song. Known as “Da-shixiong” to the lady cultivators who flock around him, as well as by less flattering epithets to others, namely Xue Meng and Ye Wangxi.

Master Huaizui

怀罪 Huai, “to bear, to think of”; zui, “sins, guilt, blame”

A monk of Wubei Temple. Renowned in the cultivation world for his choice to remain in the mortal realm despite having achieved enlightenment and being able to ascend to immortality. Master Huaizui has been in seclusion in Wubei Temple for over a century, and is reportedly able to wield the “Rebirth” technique of the three forbidden techniques. Despite his age, his physical appearance is that of a man in his early thirties. He wielded Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques, to bring Chu Wanning back from the underworld.

Li Wuxin

李无心 Surname Li; given name Wuxin, “‘an empty state of consciousness’ in buddhist meditation”

Leader of the recently established Bitan Manor. A man in his fifties, with a pair of long, flowing whiskers. Smooth-talking and somewhat

condescending to those he views as beneath himself.

Mo Ran's Mother (Unnamed)

Mo Ran's mother, who raised him on her own. A talented singer and dancer, she performed on the streets to earn money to keep Mo Ran and herself fed. Compassionate and kind despite the misery of her circumstances, she is described by Mo Ran as his first moral "lighthouse."

Jiang Xi

姜曦 Surname Jiang; given name Xi, "dawn, sunshine"

The aloof, haughty sect leader of Guyueye Sect. Rumored to be the richest person in the cultivation world. Despite his age, he looks to be in his twenties due to his cultivation method. His weapon is the longsword Xuehuang.

Ma Yun (马芸)

Sect leader of Taobao Estate. Rumored to be the third richest person in the cultivation world.

Fake "Gouchen the Exalted"

勾陈上宫 Gouchen, "Curved Array, part of the Ursa Minor constellation"; shanggong, "exalted")

An enigmatic figure who pretended to be the real Gouchen the Exalted, the God of Weaponry. He is in truth a corpse controlled by a white chess piece in a mysterious Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Hanlin the Sage

寒鳞圣手 Han, "cold"; lin, "scales"; shengshou, "highly skilled, sage doctor"

An elder of Guyueye Sect. Highly skilled in refining pills and medicines.

Little Mantuo

小曼陀 dimunitive prefix Xiao; given name Mantuo, "mandala

flower”

A young girl who has zero interest in Xue Meng, and a non-zero interest in Mei Hanxue.

Qi Liangji

戚良姬 Surname Qi; given name Liangji, “virtuous, lady”

Sect leader of Jiangdong Hall. She has a tattoo on her arm of the auspicious five-bat motif.

Master Tianchan

天禅大师 Tianchan, “heavenly, meditation”

Sect leader of Wubei Temple prior to Master Huaizui.

Third Lady Sun

孙三娘 Surname Sun; title Sanniang, “Third lady”

The richest merchant on Flying Flower Isle, a lady in her fifties who seems to value money and little else.

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, “the peak of life and death”

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern-day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect’s name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Aaaaah (啊啊啊) and Waaaah Cliffs (哇哇哇)

Where Frostsky Hall is located. Named by Xue Zhengyong as an expression of the grief he felt in the days following his brother’s death.

Frostsky Hall (霜天殿)

A hall in Sisheng Peak where bodies are kept until burial.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Melodic Springs (妙音池)

The communal bath of Sisheng Peak.

Mengpo Hall (孟婆堂)

The dining hall at Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological old woman who distributes memory-erasing soup to souls before they are reborn.

Platform of Sin and Virtue (善恶台)

A platform where public events in Sisheng Peak, including punishment and announcements, are carried out.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭**)**

Chu Wanning's residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it "Red Lotus Hell" or the "Pavilion of Broken Legs." In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun's spiritual energy.

Silk-Rinse Hall (浣纱堂**)**

The tailoring hall of Sisheng Peak, which creates and tailors clothing for members of the sect.

Three Lives Platform (三生台)

A platform in Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological stone in the underworld located by Naihe Bridge that records a soul's past, present, and future lives.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, "honoring Confucian ideals"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in

modern-day Shandong Province. Has seventy-two cities and is known for being affluent and well-respected. In Taxian-jun's lifetime, he burned them all to the ground.

Dai City (岱城)

A mildly prosperous city by the foot of Dawning Peak. Caters to traveling cultivators on their way to Jincheng Lake.

Moonwhistle Fields (啸月校场)

Training grounds in Rufeng Sect.

Ganquan Lake (甘泉湖)

A lake located to the north of the forest behind Moonwhistle Fields.

Poetry Hall (诗乐殿居)

A reception hall in Rufeng Sect that overlooks the hunting grounds.

Flying Jade Platform (飞瑶台)

A platform in Rufeng Sect.

Golden Drum Tower (金鼓塔)

A tower in Rufeng Sect beneath which demonic spirits are locked up and suppressed.

Flying Flower Isle (飞花岛)

A modest, ring-shaped island located in the East Sea close to Linyi, Flying Flower Isle is remote and sparsely populated primarily by fishermen.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, "stepping softly across snow"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in

the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, “a lonely moon in the night sky”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle (霖铃屿)

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Xuanyuan Pavilion

A subsidiary operation of Guyueye, and a trading post well known in the cultivation world. Xuanyuan is a name for the Yellow Emperor, a legendary Chinese historical figure and deity, who was one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Deities alongside Fuxi.

Fragrance Inn

An inn on Rainbell Isle.

Wubei Temple

无悲寺 wubei, “without sadness/grief”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Dragonblood Mountain (龙血山)

A mountain near Wubei Temple.

Bitan Manor

碧潭庄 bitan, “green pool”

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Taobao Estate

桃宝山庄 Taobao, “Peach Treasure”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in West Lake.

Jiangdong Hall

江东堂 Jiangdong, the south bank of the Yangtze River

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Qi Liangji became their new sect leader after the death of her husband, the previous sect leader.

Huohuang Pavilion

火凰阁 Huohuang, “fire, phoenix”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm.

OTHER

Tianyin Pavilion

天音阁 tianyin, “heavenly/divine sound”

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

Spiritual Mountain (灵山)

Where inter-sect meetings and competitions are held.

House of Drunken Jade (醉玉楼)

A high-class pleasure house in Xiangtan, famed for its theater, star songstress, and food. It burned down not long before the events of the current timeline.

Butterfly Town (彩蝶镇)

A town located near Baitou Mountain, noted for its relative prosperity compared to its neighbors. Its specialty exports are flowers, fragrance, and perfume powder. It also cleaves to the tradition of ghost marriages.

Dawning Peak (旭映峰)

A sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm, within the territory of Linyi Rufeng Sect. Known as the place where Gouchen the Exalted forged the Heavenly Emperor's sword, it is now a pilgrimage site for cultivators seeking holy weapons.

Jincheng Lake (金成池)

A lake at the summit of Dawning Peak that remains frozen over year-round. According to legend, it was formed by a drop of Gouchen the Exalted's blood, shed as he forged the Heavenly Emperor's holy sword.

Yunmeng Marsh

云梦泽 Yunmeng, "Cloud dream"

A marsh that was plagued by a carp spirit for many years.

Peach Blossom Springs (桃花源)

Home of the feathered tribe, located beyond the maze of Mount Jiuhua and within the land of the immortals. *The Peach Blossom Spring* is a fable written by Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, in which the eponymous setting is an ethereal utopia where people live a peaceful, prosperous existence in harmony with nature, unaware of the outside world. In popular culture, the setting has become a symbol of an ideal world, and it has been depicted in many paintings, poems, music, and so forth.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Bobo: Paternal uncle (father's elder brother), but also informally a term of address for someone older than one's father.

Dabo: Brother-in-law (husband's elder brother), but also informally a term of address for someone older than one's father.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; "zizi" is a regional variant of "jieije."

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzhang: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

shizhu: "Benefactor, alms-giver." A respectful term used by Buddhist and Taoist monks and priests to address laypeople.

Xianzhu: "Immortal lord/leader." Used in *Husky* as a respectful title for Eighteen, the leader of Peach Blossom Springs.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender-neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one's master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: "Sect leader/Manor leader/Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

Taizi: "Crown prince." A respectful title of address for the next in line to the throne.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one's father; sometimes a "godfather."

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Husky.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hurt**

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ Wǎnníng

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as

conjoined but separate vowels. You'll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX

Glossary

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Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit

of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

TERMINOLOGY

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information*.)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragon: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated

with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like “phoenix eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

Fae: Fae (妖 / yao), refers to natural creatures such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human form. They are sometimes referred to as “demons” or “monsters,” though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves (妖狼) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal (仙) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / “Five Phases”) in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators’ spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning’s elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crab apple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Measurements: The "miles" and "inches" in *Husky* refer not to imperial measurement units, but to the Chinese measurement units, which have varied over time. In modern times, one Chinese mile (里 / *li*) is approximately a half-kilometer, one Chinese foot (尺 / *cun*) is

approximately one-third of a meter, and one Chinese inch (寸 / *chi*) is one tenth of a Chinese foot.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

AZURE DRAGON: The Azure Dragon (苍龙 / canglong, or 青龙 / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

BLACK TORTOISE: The Black Tortoise (玄武 / xuanwu) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction North, the element of water, and the season of winter. It is usually depicted as a tortoise entwined with a serpent.

FLAME EMPEROR: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

FUXI: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

PHOENIX: Fenghuang (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

VERMILION BIRD: The Vermilion Bird (朱雀上神) is one of four

mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

YANLUO: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons, or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can

be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (乾坤囊/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to

indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Silk-tree Flowers: Silk-tree flowers (合欢花 / hehuan hua, "flowers of joyous union") symbolize love and harmonious union, as alluded to in their Chinese name.

Soul-Calling Lantern: In the world of *Husky*, soul-calling lanterns (引魂灯) are lanterns embroidered with complex spell patterns, which can only be lit and maintained using spiritual energy. A lit lantern can illuminate the human soul of a person willing to return and will hold the human soul within to be brought back and reunited with the other immortal souls and corporeal spirits. If the wielder of the lantern were to give up or have second thoughts, the human soul would be devoured.

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹/灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky*, spiritual roots (灵根) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po (三魂七魄) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods

reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation (六道轮回), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

White Moonlight: A romantic trope referring to a distant romantic paragon who is cherished in memory long after that person is gone. Like the moon in the sky, the memory is always present, perfect and unchanging, but like the pale light by one's bedside, it is an incorporeal shine that can only be admired, not touched. The object of admiration is out of reach, and the admiration is functionally one-way.

Willow Tree: Willow trees in Chinese culture have a plethora of meanings, including friendship, longing, femininity, and more. The Chinese word for willow (柳) is a homonym for the word "stay," which has led to it being featured in many poems and stories as a symbol of farewell and a reluctance to part.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking

to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal [redacted] after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"

Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"

Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

[redacted]

No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

[redacted]

2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi Roasting Writing Contest

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Dumb

"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"

Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Wealthy and handsome, yet mentally unstable—He Yu has returned home from overseas with one goal in mind: to win the heart of Xie Xue, the girl of his dreams. However, in his time away, he has nursed more than unrequited feelings. He must confront his long-held grudge against Xie Xue's overprotective brother, Xie Qingcheng, who doesn't think He Yu capable of love.

But history is not easily rewritten. As He Yu's former doctor, Xie Qingcheng is the only person in the world who truly understands He Yu's volatile mental state. When the two are involved in an explosive incident that exposes a dark secret, Xie Qingcheng's suspicions about He Yu are confirmed. Now, He Yu must confront his own demons...including his dark obsession with Xie Qingcheng.

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Where There's Smoke

As the day of Nangong Si and Song Qiutong's wedding draws near, a scandalous rumor circulates among the guests at Rufeng Sect. The gossip implicates not only the bride and groom, but also Nangong Si's childhood companion and Song Qiutong's savior: the young hero, Ye Wangxi.

When the wedding festivities are interrupted by a mysterious man claiming to know even more explosive secrets, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning are thrown together in the ensuing chaos. But the more time he spends at Chu Wanning's side, the more torturous it is for Mo Ran to suppress his feelings of fierce attraction and deep tenderness. Could love finally tame the beast that was the cruel tyrant Taxian-jun?

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Footnotes

Chapter 155: Shizun, Aren't You Surprised?

[1] "Dog balls"

Chapter 156: Shizun Is Good at Riding

[2] Refers to the seven stars of Beidou, the asterism known as Ursa Major or the Big Dipper in Western astronomy.

Chapter 157: Shizun, on My Wedding Night Back Then, I Actually…

[3] "Bobo" and "dabo" are both general ways to address a man older than one's father, but "dabo" is also a specific term used for one's husband's older brother (brother-in-law), as "bobo" can specifically refer to one's father's older brother (uncle). The usage here is general.

[4] Mei Hanxue's surname means "plum blossom" and his given name contains the word "snow."

Chapter 168: Shizun, Someone's Messing with the Body

[5] Xun (埙), an egg-shaped flute made of clay or ceramic.

Chapter 176: Shizun, Why Don't You Buy Me

[6] Also a euphemism for prostitution.

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